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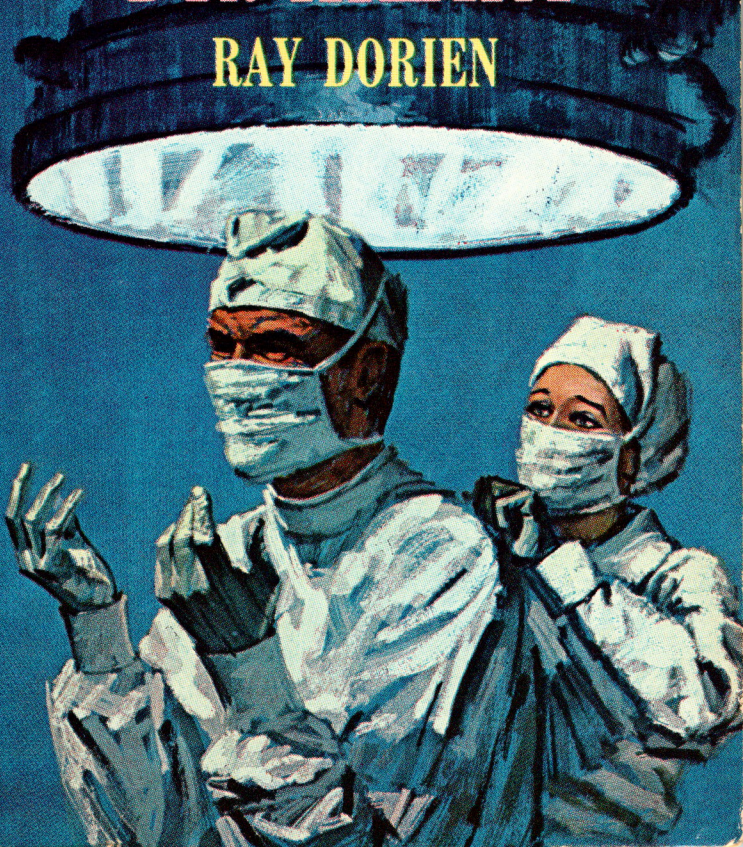
To be true to those she loved, must she be false to herself?

THE HEART OF DR. HILARY

RAY DORIEN



Complete Novel

FLIGHT FROM LOVE

Dr. Hilary West had just finished her rounds and was writing up her notes when the telephone rang. As she heard the familiar voice her heart leaped.

"I've been called out on an emergency case, Hilary. I'm to fly to Geneva as soon as I can," said Mark very formally. She sensed the coldness in his voice.

"I'm sorry you're going . . . just now," she managed to say.

And a voice deep in her own heart told her he was going away forever. Dr. Mark Duncaster might return to England, but would his pride ever allow him to return to a woman he suspected of deceit?

THE HEART OF DR. HILARY

by

RAY DORIEN

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I

"THE MOST wonderful view I've ever seen in my life."

The words, spoken in a man's deep voice, the kind of voice which one would remember for its sincerity and enthusiasm, echoed Hilary West's own thought.

She was standing on the cliff path among the trees above the Victoria Falls. The African moon had changed the everyday world, so that, although there were friends in the group around her, visitors from the hotel, from the rest camp and from the town of Livingstone, they seemed far away.

Before them crashed the silver flood of the Zambezi River which hushed their voices and dazzled their eyes, and from the hundreds of feet below rose the veil of fine mist which caught and held now the mystery of a lunar rainbow. It quivered into shape, melted and changed every second so that the colors, pale blue and violet, were laid on the moving silver of the immense Falls.

The voice had been from just behind her, or she could not have heard it so clearly. She did not know whether the speaker was with her friends or not. But while she stood fascinated, her senses drowned in the immensity, the crash, she could not help drawing a little nearer to the cliff edge.

A hand caught at her elbow.

"Careful," said the same deep voice.

She turned and laughed slightly.

"Thank you. It was just that my foot was caught on a tree root and I felt unsteady."

"I thought you might have felt drawn to the falling waters, that irresistible fascination. I can understand it."

They were close together, their voices sounding like whispers to each other, each caught in the same experience of wonder.

"No, I'm too sensible for that," she answered soberly.

"Meaning I'm not?"

The quick turn of the head above her gave her a glimpse of his strong face, the shadows lengthening the line of nose and chin.

She shook her head, amused and surprised at his quick answer. She turned back to the immense picture before her—the curve of dark trees away on her left, the distant line of the further shore of the great Zambezi River, and always this falling curtain of the thunderous waters and the smoke of mist which rose from them, which had been rising from them for hundreds of thousands of years.

"It's the grandest thing," he repeated as if spellbound.

"You're from England?" she asked.

"I came for a conference here," he said. "Couldn't resist staying on for a few days longer."

His eyes were on her now instead of on the great river.

Small groups began to move about her. Families who had kept children up late to see the wonder of the lunar rainbow were passing her, and as she drew back into the shadow of the trees, she realized that the man who had spoken to her was still there, that he had been studying her while she had been standing still.

"We're walking along the river path, Hilary. Collect you with the car when we come back?" cried her friend Emily turning from her husband's arm. "Don't fall in."

The groups moved away, and with them the man who had spoken to Hilary.

There was a wooden bench nearby. Hilary had noticed it that morning, just beyond the place where the African craftsmen from the nearby village displayed their carvings. She hesitated about buying a pair of good-natured elephants as book ends, or a walking stick for her brother John, now in England. He was part of her problem.

Hilary sat down on the bench. She had come here with

a problem, and it was still there, at the back of her mind. That had been one of the reasons for her visit to the Victoria Falls.

The kindness of Emily and her husband Don, whisking her away from her mother and the farm, insisting that she must have a break after her studies, had been welcome, but almost overpowering.

Should she go to England, leaving her mother and young Robin on the farm? Or should she stay on in Rhodesia instead of hoping for that appointment in London? Even supposing it was offered to her? She sighed. John's last gay letter had presented her with temptation.

> Old Great Uncle Roger is giving me the whale of a time. He hasn't forgiven old Gran yet! Imagine Dad's mother, one of the Fennells, running away to marry a chap from Rhodesia! But he might melt in time to me. I'm playing attentive boy in the business, might be something good for me in it later on. Now if you can get an appointment here in England, there'll be two of us to cheer up the "lonely old feller". And with his business and his club and his cronies, I can tell you the 'lonely old feller' doesn't have such a bad time. Come on, Sis.

Hilary sat there, drawing the light wool coat over her shoulders, for the air blew cool from the great waters after the hot day. She was rested by the vision before her, passing figures did not distract her, the rainbow trembled and almost disappeared in some freak of mist, then strengthened its pale colors again.

She heard familiar voices from the river path. Emily and her husband Don were talking to a stranger.

"We can give you a lift back to the hotel. No trouble. We're staying in the rest camp. Cheaper for us. Hi there, Hilary. We're giving Duncaster—what is it, Mark Duncaster?—a lift. He's from London."

"Yes, Mark Duncaster," said the man with them, in the deep voice which Hilary remembered from those few minutes ago. "Thanks very much. I could walk it, you know. I came

with some people from the hotel, but I expect they went long ago, at this time of night."

"No trouble," boomed the cheerful Rhodesian voice of Don Evans. "Come on."

Inevitably he led the way with Emily, and Hilary had to walk beside the stranger. She felt her nerves quivering with an odd awareness that they were meeting again, so soon. Was it absurd to think that he had noticed her, had heard her friends calling to her, and that he had made the opportunity to talk to them? Yet she felt an odd assurance that he had sought her out since the first moment. Emily and Don had the easy geniality of Rhodesians on holiday in their own country, only too proud to display its beauties to a stranger, and they had their own links, if far back, with England.

As they crossed the open space where the moonlight was so much stronger than under the trees, Hilary turned back for one last look at the silver waters, cut short now by the bank, so that only the thunder of the fall betrayed the height of the cliff, and the depth below.

"It is so wonderful," she repeated. "And to think I've never seen it before."

"And you're Rhodesian!" he said.

So he knew that from talk with the chatterbox Evans couple.

She nodded, hastening to apologize for her neglect of the Victoria Falls.

"Well, I was at school, and then studying in South Africa, and then home at the farm; there's so much to do, one thing after another."

She was not going to tell him that the death of an extravagant, generous father a few years ago had left the farm in debt, had caused a tightening of belts in the West family, had set her to work harder at her studies, and had driven John, so like her father, to write to the only elderly relative of their grandmother's family in England. Her mother had been bitter and proud about that. No need to go crying to people who don't know us, never bothered about us, she had insisted, and it was against her wishes that John had written to Roger Fennell.

"I know," Mark Duncaster said easily. "It's like living in

London, and never going to the Tower of London unless you take a visitor there."

He had a deep, resonant voice. It seemed already familiar to her from those few words he had spoken about the Falls. Now she was curious to see what he looked like, and turned her head to find that he, too, was gazing down at her as if she were suddenly important to him.

He saw a girl's face, with short dark hair blown about a smooth forehead, a straight little nose, a mouth which looked sad in repose. He could not see the color of the eyes, but he was sure they were thoughtful. He could not explain to himself her mysterious attraction.

Whether she felt the same, he could not tell. She moved on towards the car.

"Is this taking you out of your way?" Mark protested to Don Evans.

"For Heaven's sake, quit being so polite. Our huts are just along the road, and we can run you to the hotel and be back in no time. Hop in the back with Hilary."

They were sitting together in the intimacy of the back seat, so that he could have touched her.

"I don't know your name," he said.

"It's Hilary, Hilary West."

"Hilary," he repeated in a low voice, so that the others did not hear it.

The car tore along the road, leaving behind the rich trees, which depended on the moisture of the Zambezi, for the scrubby bush, swung round into the car park and stopped at the end of the path which led to the hotel between tropical shrubs.

"Good of you," said Mark Duncaster as he got out. "Give me a chance to return your hospitality. I'm staying on for a few days on my own now that the conference is over."

"The medical conference?" asked Hilary West, with the first interest she had displayed.

"Yes, I had leave from my hospital to come out to it. Very grateful to them."

"Then you and Hilary ought to get together," said the irrepressible Don, ignoring a jolt from the elbow of his wife.

"Could you all have lunch with me here tomorrow?" said Mark Duncaster.

"Right. Hilary talks about going through the rain forest, but I've done it before, and I don't want to get drowned again," said Emily frankly.

"Everyone says it is an experience," said Mark Duncaster. "See you tomorrow, then, on the terrace? Just before one? Good night."

He waved as the car turned and moved away. Hilary watched him in spite of herself, the tall figure, long head set well on his shoulders, long slim hands as the light from the hotel lamps caught them in movement.

"Nice chap," said Don. "Now back to by-byes for you girls."

Hilary had the rondavel, the round hut, next to that occupied by the Evans. She could not hear their conversation, but she could hear their voices across the space, Emily's remonstrances, Don's loud laughter and protests. They would be talking about her, possibly, for Emily, being happily married, thought everyone else should be, too.

It was strange how people could not understand, people who were dear, comforting friends. They did not appreciate that watching the difficulties of her mother with her father had made Hilary conscious of defects of character, had made her wary and on the defensive. She had had friends, she had gone to parties, but she did not want to care as her mother had cared, she did not want to be hurt as her mother had been hurt, time and time again, by the extravagance, the carelessness of her father.

"You can't farm in bedroom slippers," Mrs. West had said so many times. "Riding and new cars, and more debts to the bank. Just because your mother came of a wealthy old English family, and I've heard that often enough, is no reason why you should think you'd be kept instead of working for your living. And sometimes I think your son John is tarred with the same brush."

"Now, now," her father would say cheerfully. "Always looking for trouble."

Trouble had found them soon enough. When times were good, Frank West overspent; when times were bad, life

was impossible. He drank more than ever, perhaps to still his own regrets, and when his car overturned at a bridge after an agricultural show, more trouble piled on his family.

Should I take a post here at home? Or should I spread my wings? Hilary's thoughts were painful and chaotic.

John had deserted, he had escaped to a different life, leaving his mother and his younger brother to cope with the farm.

And now there was the possibility that she too might go to England. Her young ambition was stirred. She had not told her mother that she had already applied for a post at St. Antholin's hospital in London. It would mean leaving so much. Her mother would not stand in her way. That strict, honest woman who had driven herself so hard, who had allowed herself no weakness, who had compressed her lips at her husband's faults and worked all the harder because of them, might seem dry and hard to outsiders. Hilary knew what a depth of emotion was there, taken for granted by John and Robin.

The wind changed, a cooler draught blew from the Falls, and now she heard the musical thunder, that continual rush of water. It was the most wonderful thing she had ever seen. The man with the deep voice had said that. She smiled at the memory of that voice which had seemed to say so much more to her than the simple ordinary words, and she fell asleep.

"So it's you for the rain forest, eh, Hilary?" asked Don the next morning after he had eaten a large and satisfactory breakfast. "Well, better you than me. It's hot enough without going into a Turkish bath as well."

"Remember lunch with Mark Duncaster," reminded Emily. "We'll see you on the hotel terrace. Tell you what, on our way into Livingstone, we'll drop you over by the Falls, not in them, by the Devil's Cataract, and then you can start your walk."

They left her above the Devil's Cataract, on the other side of the Falls, over a mile away from where she had stood last night. She had passed the statue of the first white men who had discovered the Falls only a hundred years ago,

thinking that the figure of David Livingstone looked as if he were still striding through the forest.

Now she stood on a great flat gray boulder, and the Zambezi River slid by at her feet, with a terrifying purposefulness, to fall suddenly away, engulfing the wooded cliffs to her right in a cloud of spray. Little dancing rainbows, sunlit this time, moved in the spray far below her, and again she felt swept away in space and time, to a region far from her family problem.

"So there you are," said a delighted voice behind her. "I just ran into your friends, and they said you were here. I always find you gazing into the water. Don't you think I'd better come with you to protect you?"

In the bright sunlight he looked a little older than she had thought last night. He was a decided person; he would always know what he wanted, and it was flattering to think that he had hurried from his meeting with the Evans to meet her. It was if the shared experience last night had quickened a natural attraction.

He helped her on with her raincoat, and watched her tie a scarf over her dark hair.

"Doesn't it seem absurd to do this in the sunshine?" she laughed, and he noticed with delight how her face changed, how the intensely dark blue-gray eyes deepened in color, how the lips curved, how the extreme reflective thoughtfulness which had attracted him last night melted into a gaiety and pleasure almost naive.

"Your friends told me that the mist would sweep over us without warning," he said, as he flung a raincape over his shoulders. "My wardrobe is limited. I fly back soon."

Hilary was disappointed and annoyed at her disappointment. She had met young men who attracted her and pleased her, but she had always kept herself from any deeper emotion because of that instinctive caution inherited from her mother. There was no reason why this stranger, this Englishman, should attract her.

They passed under the trees into a region shot with sun and shadow, their feet in puddles of mud, their faces assailed at once with the fine spray from the Falls. There was a scent of warmth and moisture. Ferns grew vividly among ribbon-like

grass. All the vegetation responded to the play of the water, to the rich leaf mould of countless generations. The sound of the Falls was too loud for them to hear what they said to each other, and so they mimicked actions which made them laugh like children.

Jumping over puddles, wading through soft, slippery mud, brushing aside the continual rain drops, Hilary felt a light-heartedness unusual to her. Her lips curved in a smile; she did not disdain Mark Duncaster's helping hand at the winding path, at crossing the wet patches. Her white raincoat was running with water, there were raindrops in her hair, her sandaled feet were wet and brown, and to him she was the loveliest girl he had ever met.

They followed the winding paths, descending to the lower and even wetter region. Several times they met fellow adventurers, in a variety of clothing. Middle-aged determined ladies, in the heavy bright yellow oilskin coats provided by the Victoria Falls hotel, strode with sticks through the worst of the spray. Youths lightly attired in brief shorts splashed their bare feet through the puddles, girls sheltered their fashionable hair-dos under coats held over their heads.

"Preparations aren't any good," said Hilary at last, as they emerged from the wettest area. "You get wet anyway, and the only thing is a bath at the end."

"You mean another bath," he said.

He threw off his cape in the brilliant steaming sunshine which now enveloped them. His hair was plastered to his head, his face was wet, tanned and happy.

"We could go back," said Hilary mischievously.

"Do you want to do that?"

"No. Emily told me we might get a lift at the road. But we have to walk there."

She combed back her wet hair, looked ruefully at her splashed bare legs and her ruined sandals, and said, "Oh, what does it matter? It was fun. I wish my young brother Robin had been here."

"You've brothers and sisters?" he asked with interest.

"Two brothers only, and John is away, in England."

"And you haven't been snapped up by some big Rhodesian?"

He wanted to know, she realized.

"No," she said, with some reserve. "I'm not . . . not that sort of girl. Besides, I had my work. I was studying." Her voice brightened. "Although we used to have wonderful times—over four years ago, now—John and I and a friend of mine, Vi Fanshawe, on the farm. A whole gang of us. Riding and picnics and swimming; we have a big dam near us, and the boys went sailing. Then it all changed. My father died and John went away."

Her voice had changed to sadness.

"Then I was away, studying, and John wandered about and couldn't seem to settle." She sighed. "Now he's in England, staying with an old uncle, and he loves it, and is having a marvelous time."

"Don't you want to join him?" he asked her. "Your friends told me you had just passed your examinations—fully fledged doctor, eh?"

Hilary laughed.

"John and I are very different. He's so gay, he loves dashing about and spending money—"

She stopped, then went on defiantly. "That's it. We've been very hard up. I wanted to get a hospital appointment as soon as I could. A lot depends on me."

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "And doesn't anything depend on John? Perhaps I shouldn't say that."

"John is different," she admitted. "He's charming and goodlooking; he'll never be any good on the farm. My mother runs it with the boys."

"Boys? Oh, the African servants of course."

"We've had them for years. Old Josiah is very good. And the Evans are good neighbors. But it means hard work for my mother. Young Robin will go to agricultural college soon, and he's a help. The question is, whether I should stay home, I mean, in Rhodesia."

"You'd easily get an appointment. I know how short the hospitals are of medical staff in this country. Why do you hesitate? And what was your training?"

"I wanted to work with children."

"So we're two of a kind, after all," he said with some

amusement. "I'm attached to St. Antholin's, in London. You may have heard of it."

"Heard of it! Of course I have, and I've seen pictures of it too," Hilary answered with sudden interest. "A friend of mine showed me some photographs of the new wing. It seemed to me to have such a jumble of buildings, bits stuck on here and there. They want to build a brand new place."

"Don't forget you've got space to build here," he teased her. "Old St. Antholin's has been there quite a little while."

"Yes, I know, before Rhodesia was thought of," answered Hilary sharply. "I am tired of that argument."

At the deepening amusement in his hazel eyes under the mop of his brownish hair, tinged with red, she stopped and laughed at herself.

"Yes, I know, but why does age matter so much in England? My grandfather cut down trees and burnt off the bush and built bridges and dams and even roads to make a place for himself, and I think that's far more worth while than sitting back and saying King Henry the Eighth slept here—as if anyone cared!"

Now they were laughing together as they had followed the winding path, and were now beside the bridge over the Falls, the bridge which held the main road.

"I have been severely and properly snubbed," he said gravely. "I shall never boast of King Henry again, although I have sometimes envied his experience."

"No," she exclaimed.

"Now come and look down at the Boiling Pot from the bridge," he advised.

"You're from . . . from St. Antholin's, I think you said. What is your department?"

"Surgical side," he said briefly. "I'm very interested in the heart jobs we can do nowadays."

"Of course," breathed Hilary.

She listened with interest to his keen enthusiasm.

At last he stopped.

"You must forgive me for talking 'shop', " he said with a slight smile, almost apologetic, but which Hilary found attractive.

"I don't see how anyone can help talking about the things

which interest them so much. It's wonderful to think what can be done."

"Especially to anyone who listens as well as you do," he told her. "No, I mean that. Women often listen with wide-open eyes and an interested expression, and then remark about someone's new frock."

Hilary laughed.

"You have studied women, haven't you?"

"I did study one," he answered more soberly than she expected.

Those strong, flexible fingers, those firm hands which must not tire at the chance of life and death touched her imagination, and her medical interest.

They stood looking down at the boiling water far below, conscious of the hot sun on their backs, conscious also that their arms, lying along the railing, were touching, and that the strong current of attraction between them was sweeping them along faster than they realized.

There was a squeak of brakes behind them as a Land Rover pulled up. "Hilary West, well, I'm darned," shouted a young man at the driving wheel. "Come on over. Want a lift?"

If Mark Duncaster were disappointed at the interruption he made no sign, but Hilary too was disappointed.

"That's one thing in this country, you're always meeting someone you know," she said rapidly to him.

"Advantage or not?" he asked.

"This is Laddie Merrett and his wife Jane, and how are you two young rascals?"

A pleasant-faced young woman in tartan slacks waved enthusiastically to Hilary, while the two small children in the back of the Land Rover peered over her shoulder.

"Give you and your friend a lift?" said Laddie.

"This is Mark Duncaster from England," Hilary said swiftly and then was engulfed by the entwining arms of Margaret and David. "Strangle me, would you?"

"Hop in. Last time I saw you was—let's see—that summer with John and that pal of yours, what was her name?"

"Violet Fanshawe," said his wife quietly. "How do you like Rhodesia, Mr. Duncaster?"

They were jammed into the Land Rover, Hilary and

Mark seated among a pile of suitcases, a folded tent, a collapsible boat, comic papers and furry animals in a state of extreme disrepair.

He answered mechanically, while he noticed Hilary's usual air of reservation returning to her.

"What happened to that girl Violet?" Laddie asked with interest. "We all thought she and John would make a case of it. Fact is, I had a bet on it."

"You know Laddie, he'd bet on anything," said his wife contentedly.

"Well, they were certainly going strong. Is he here with you, Hilary? You at the hotel?"

"No, I'm at the rest camp with the Evans. And John's in England, didn't you know?"

"The old so and so, didn't give us a hint. What's he doing?"

"You remember he dug up the address of my grandmother's brother in England, Uncle Roger Fennell, and wrote to him, claiming acquaintance."

"I bet you didn't like that, Hilary," said Jane with a shrewd glance at the girl. "Margaret, don't strangle her. It may be love, but it looks painful."

"No, I didn't," said Hilary.

To talk to Mark Duncaster alone was one thing, but now this frank discussion of her family affairs in front of him embarrassed her. Laddie and his wife Jane had never been embarrassed in their lives.

"Anyway, he went over and introduced himself, and now he's living in the flat with Uncle Roger Fennell, our great uncle, I suppose he is, and having a grand time."

"Broke it off with Violet, then? Or did she go too?"

"Oh, no," said Hilary. "She was a school friend of mine, but we didn't keep in touch, and after John went, she simply faded out. She may be married for all I know. I should have written but you know how it is. I sometimes thought that he didn't treat her quite fairly, but—"

"But we all know old John, don't we?" said Laddie with a heartiness for which Hilary could have hit him.

He was on a sore point, the fact that John with his charm and good looks could get away with things that so many people would condemn.

The Land Rover had bowled quickly along the road, with the scrubby bush on each side, bush so different from the tropical rain forest through which she and Mark Duncaster had come.

"Where do you want to be dropped?"

"I must have a bath and change," said Hilary. "I'm at the camp with the Evans. But Dr. Duncaster will want the hotel."

"O.K. folks, here we are. Pleased to meet you. Mind you give folks back home a good account of this country. We'll take you on, Hilary."

As Mark Duncaster descended at the pathway which led through the tropical bushes to the hotel entrance, she found that she was watching his retreating back with interest. In a few minutes she would see him again, that was a welcoming thought. She was surprised how quickly he had entered her life, how immediately he had come to matter to her. She did not know that her eyes were smiling, her lips curved softly in glowing expectancy.

"Who is your friend?" asked Jane, with interest as they drove on.

"He's Dr. Duncaster, from England. He made friends with the Evans, that's how he . . . happened along."

"Don't tell me that he talks to you only about medical things," teased Jane.

The children shouted as a small car turned impulsively in front of them.

"Well, talk of angels, did you see who that was?" asked Laddie. "Woman driver."

"Well?" asked Hilary, wondering whether she should wear the brown linen frock or the flowered cotton for the hotel lunch.

"Your friend Violet, of all people! I'll bet it was her. Thinner than she used to be, but she had a red head I'd remember anywhere."

"Trust you," said his wife indulgently.

"Turning into the hotel car park, too."

"Good gracious, she may be staying there," said Hilary with interest. "I must find out if it really was Violet when I come back to the hotel."

"She might have a job," observed Jane. "Didn't seem to have any relations as I remember."

"Well, give her my love and tell her I dream of her," said Laddie, with a sideways glance at his wife, who responded, as he had expected, with a light slap on his cheek.

The children cheered with enthusiasm at this usual happening, and Hilary had to laugh too, to join in the general merriment. Her own family had never had that carefree atmosphere.

"Here you are," the Land Rover had drawn up at the rest camp. "Where's your rondavel?"

"I'm just there, not far. And there are the Evans, waiting for me. They'll take me back."

"Back to the arms of my beloved," trilled Laddie, and she could have hit him except for his comical expression.

"Don't forget to look up your old friend Vi," he shouted as the Land Rover rumbled away, and the children waved the furry animals so that the vehicle seemed full of waving arms.

The sunburnt color of the severe brown linen dress matched the brown of Hilary's arms and legs, and she knew that she looked radiant. If her hair were still damp from the mist of the Falls, the ends curled slightly, and her lipstick added a vivid touch of color.

She hurried out to the others and Emily said, "You've been quick for you. Anyway, we can always sit on the terrace."

How absurd I am, thought Hilary, feeling as if it's years since I've seen him already. Her heart was beating fast, as they walked from the car park to the hotel entrance where the barefooted, white-clad African "boys" waited to carry luggage or to run messages.

"I'm going to make an enquiry at the reception desk," said Hilary. "Why, Violet *is* there."

She moved to the long reception desk where an American was asking about a change of room. The red-haired girl behind the counter flashed a glance at her, and for one odd second there seemed a touch of fear in the glance. How ridiculous! But maybe Violet still cherished a tenderness for John, and for that reason had an enmity towards the rest of his family. Hilary studied her friend. She was older than

Hilary and she looked thinner, slightly strained round the mouth, although the pale skin, the brilliant red hair were as striking as ever. They had been such good friends at school, later sharing rides and swimming in the dam, bush picnics at Hilary's home. There had been one occasion when Violet had killed a snake. Hilary could not forget Violet's pose, stick in hand, triumph and fear and hatred in her expression. Hilary wondered why she should remember that now looking at the polite reserve of the trained receptionist.

At last the American went away, and Violet turned towards her friend.

"Fancy seeing you here!" they began together, and then laughed.

"What are you doing here?" asked Hilary.

"I'm only a temporary. I've been in Durban, in Natal on this sort of job, and then this cropped up and I thought it would be a change. So here I am. And you're a doctor, Hilary! I read about you in the paper."

"I don't know quite how it is that we lost sight of you," said Hilary, her affection for the girl reviving. "So many things happened. I did send Christmas cards." Hilary felt hurt at Violet's reluctance to speak of herself. She did not ask after John. Whatever had happened between them was their own affair. In spite of their old friendship a gulf divided them.

"You like it here?"

"Yes, it's pleasant, and interesting. I'm busy all the time. I can't get over you being a doctor, Hilary. There was a medical conference here last week."

"I know. We're going to have lunch with Dr. Duncaster."

"Dr. Duncaster? He's a surgeon, a big heart man, I believe," said Violet still with that off-hand manner.

"You know John is in London."

"Is he?" Violet said with indifference.

So that's all right, thought Hilary. I've broken the ice, and she doesn't care about him any more. I must have been mistaken.

Then she saw the other girl's hand was gripping the desk tightly. Violet was not as indifferent as she appeared.

Don Evans, a big broad-shouldered figure in his khaki

shorts, came toward them. "Chatter on, girls," he said. "Only fifteen minutes late, Hilary."

"Let's have a talk some time," Hilary said brightly. "I'm at the rest camp with the Evans; I could run over to meet you."

"It's a bit awkward," said Violet slowly.

"I'd like it," said Hilary firmly. "There's no reason to be upstage with me, now is there, Violet?"

Suddenly Violet laughed.

"The same old downright Hilary. I'll let you know. Nice to see you again."

She had to turn to another visitor at the desk, but Hilary was relieved at the disappearance of tension. John had hurt the other girl, she was sure; she had visited her resentment at his defection on his sister, but there was no reason why John's behavior should spoil her friendship.

She went with the impatient Don to the terrace with its view of the railway bridge over the Zambezi River, the spray rising from the hidden Falls.

"Here you are," said Mark Duncaster, rising from his wicker chair. "What will you have to drink?"

"It's Hilary's fault we're so late. Waited for her to change," teased Emily, settling her broad figure comfortably at a table, while the white-clad waiter hovered expectantly, a beaming smile on his brown face.

"And worth it?" asked Mark Duncaster, his eyes glinting with mischief. "Contrast from the rain forest, I must say."

"How people can want to go through that, just to get wet!" said Emily vigorously.

She was cried down by her husband, by Mark and by Hilary.

"It isn't only the fascination of the Falls," protested Duncaster. "I've been about a bit. Just to realize the distances these chaps of explorers walked—walked, mind you, when you insisted on driving me a few yards back to the hotel! And the scrub and the Africans' huts—just the same as then, a hundred years ago—the atmosphere fascinates me."

"Yes, we have got something here," said the Rhodesian Don modestly.

"Honestly, you sound as if you'd made the place yourself,

Don Evans," said his wife with disgust. "Cheers, Dr. Duncaster. Now tell us what plays are on in London."

In the long dining-room, where the snowy white table cloths, the white linen backs to the chairs, and the white suits of the black waiters gave the illusion of being on board ship, with the whirring of the fans above them, Hilary found herself listening to every tone in that deep, expressive voice. It was as if there were an undercurrent in his words which only she could understand. And when at the end of the meal, Emily frankly said that she intended to go back to the rest camp to sleep, whatever anyone else did, Hilary felt released.

"I shall stay on the terrace until it's a little cooler," she announced. "And then take the bus to the Big Tree or the Devil's Cataract again."

"Very good idea," said Mark Duncaster in a casual tone, but with an approving glance.

"See you later," said Emily, with a smile over her shoulder.

When Don and Emily had gone Mark took a chair beside Hilary. Now that they were alone, he fell silent. She knew that he was looking at her carefully, but she would not meet his gaze. She looked across the wide terrace to the stretch of rough grass, the green arms of the trees where the monkeys were playing at swings, the miniature bridge with the spray rising like a cloud. Enormous green leaves rose above the balustrade of the terrace.

"What do you call these great things?" Mark asked her idly.

"I was just thinking that the name was right for them," she answered. "They're called elephants' ears. They look like them, don't they?"

They smiled at each other.

People moved around them, Americans with cameras, a graceful Indian woman in a cerise colored sari beside a portly husband, some Rhodesian schoolboys in shorts.

"I haven't known you very long, but I feel as if every moment has mattered," he said slowly. "I wish I could stay on, but I must go in a few days. I've hired a car for myself, can't be dependent on all these kind Rhodesians. It didn't matter when I was at the conference, we went about in a

herd, but now it's different. Will you guide me? Come out with me every chance there is?"

"I'm a stranger here myself," she answered flippantly.

"Let's go, then."

As they went through the hall, Hilary caught sight of Violet Fanshawe alone at the reception desk. The girl waved, Hilary hesitated, then approached the desk while Mark Duncaster went for the car.

"I am off this evening," said Violet brightly.

"I'm sorry, but I have another engagement," Hilary said reluctantly. "Another time, Violet."

"That's O.K. by me."

The tone was flippant, but she knew that she had hurt Violet's feelings. But she could not let this wonderful time with Mark Duncaster go by for the sake of talking to Violet about old times.

Then she said quickly, "Was it important? I mean, did you want to talk about something particularly? I just had the impression . . . and if you want me—"

"Good gracious no, why should I?" said the other girl so quickly that Hilary hesitated.

"See you soon, another time," said Violet lightly.

Hilary did not guess in what strange circumstances she was to see the girl again.

Those next few days were dream-like to Hilary. Together she and Mark Duncaster explored bush and river, flew over the game reserve to see giraffe and elephants, always returning to their favorite seat above the Devil's Cataract, to look at the silver mist torn apart to show the cruel grey rocks, the glancing rainbows.

"You know, I have to fly back the day after tomorrow."

"So soon?" she exclaimed in dismay. "I—"

He held her hands firmly, looking into her eyes.

"That's how I feel. But there's something I must say. If I were a boy I could rush into this so joyfully. I've never met anyone like you. I want . . . now I'm trying to be sensible. Once I was in love, years ago, when I was a struggling student, and . . . she let me down. I mean, I'm no saint, but she played me a dirty trick, and I said I'd never trust a woman again. All I wanted of her was the truth, but she couldn't tell

it. She wound herself up in a mass of lies; it was a sickening story really. If she'd only come to me in the beginning it would have been different. I sound like a prig, don't I? But I want to build a life on . . . one something sound. My parents were divorced. I've a horror of that kind of life. Do you know what I'm driving at?"

There was something boyish and pleading in his words, as if he were driving himself on, almost against the grain. As if he had set himself a standard, and because of his youthful experiences was hardening himself against his own impulses, his own desires.

Hilary smiled at him, she could not help it, her eyes, those deep blue-gray eyes glowing at him.

"It's your training, Dr. Duncaster," she said gently. "You want to be quite, quite sure in your diagnosis, isn't that it?"

At the gentle mockery in her tone, he seized her in his arms and kissed her violently.

"Diagnosis be damned, and you know it," he muttered in her ear. "What have you done to me, you confounded darling?"

Hilary laughed.

"No, no, wait. I do understand what you are talking about. You distrust violent impulses. So do I. Indeed I do. You mustn't make any decision."

"Mustn't I? When time is so short? If you'd only come to England, darling."

"I . . . I don't know," she said, keeping as a surprise the fact, concealed even from her mother, that she had applied to St. Antholin's.

"You don't seem to be heartbroken at my going, Hilary," he told her. "What am I going to do without you?"

"Mend broken hearts, sew them up so cleverly," she reminded him with happy laughter. "Sutures and frozen blood and—"

"Have I talked too much about my job?" he asked ruefully.

"No, no, I loved it," she assured him in his arms.

It was after sunset when he drove her back.

"I would rather not come along to see your hospitable friends, the Evans," he said.

Hilary walked to the rondavel from which came the sound of music from the radio attached to the car battery.

"Thank Heaven you've come," said Emily, springing up. "We didn't know where you were. Don will have the car ready in a minute. He'll take you to the hospital at Livingstone straight away. They telephoned to the warden here; she wants to see you."

"What is the matter?" asked Hilary anxiously. "Mother? What's happened at home?"

"Take it easy, girl. Nothing like that. It's Violet, your friend at the reception desk at the hotel. Had an accident. She was driving, too quickly, and a big car smashed into her. Badly hurt, and she's kept asking for you since she came round. And we didn't know where you were."

Don opened the door of the car.

"I'll come too," said Emily, in a subdued voice. "Poor girl. These accidents."

"If you remember, she was driving carelessly only the other afternoon," Don pointed out.

"Why did she ask for me?" asked Hilary.

"Only one she knows round here, I suppose. No one seems to know anything about her people."

At the hospital, Hilary found herself ushered into a private room.

"She's been asking for you ever since she recovered consciousness. But you mustn't be long," said the Irish nurse in charge.

Hilary went to the bed, aghast at the change in her friend. Even the tumbled hair under the white bandages seemed to have lost its brilliance.

"Hilary." The whisper reached her. "Sit down here. I can't move . . . I can't talk much. But I must tell you, quickly. John—"

"Yes, Violet. He's in England."

The feverish hand tightened its grasp on Hilary's wrist.

"He never knew. He promised me . . . but he left me. And I was damned if I'd whistle after him. I've taken such good care of her; she's with a nice woman . . . no one knew. You must never tell him, never tell anyone. But . . . I'm smashed

up. Don't you think so, Hilary? You're a doctor. I'm frightened. Who's going to look after Belinda if anything happens to me? Hilary, will you take her? She's John's child."

II

HILARY was still holding the girl's hand. It was hot and feverish, and she saw danger signs in the exhausted face under the white bandages which bound the brilliant hair, giving a strange effect of fancy dress.

"Violet, what are you saying?" she stammered. "John! But I didn't know . . . and my mother!"

A faint smile came to the girl's lips, then she closed her eyes.

"She never liked me, never trusted me. Maybe she was right."

"But John didn't know?" persisted Hilary.

Violet nodded her head painfully. "No. He never cared. She's three years old. I went away to have her; she has my name Belinda Fanshawe. She's with Mrs. Bott, Alvina Bott, outside Durban. In Salisbury people would talk. I've saved money, I'm insured, it's all for her."

"Hush don't talk like that," Hilary was shocked, amazed at the realization, trying to adjust herself to it. "Haven't you any people?" she asked. "Isn't there anyone—"

"No, no, didn't you know? I'm only repeating my mother's story. There was some money left for me, and I made a will as she did . . . with . . . with the same man in Salisbury. It's all for her—oh, my darling." A sob shook the girl's shoulders.

"You mustn't," said Hilary gently. "But John, why didn't he know? Why didn't you tell him?"

Hilary was surprised at Violet's strength of will. This affair had been going on so secretly.

"That holiday we all had—" she began.

"Yes, that's when it started," said Violet. "But suppose I die? I don't want to, I've got Belinda to think of."

Her voice took a high, almost delirious note.

"You must have her, you must take charge of her if any-

thing happens to me. You mustn't tell John, or anyone. Never, never."

"You must be quiet," said Hilary, although she felt that the turmoil of her own thoughts must be apparent to the suffering girl.

She felt anger against John, a touch of resentment against Violet herself, perplexity at this problem presented to her.

"I'm afraid you'd better go," said the authoritative voice of the Sister behind Hilary. "This interview has been much too tiring for the patient."

"I'll go now, but I'll come in again," said Hilary, pressing the hot hand, then laying it gently on the bed cover.

"You will? You promise?" gasped the breathless demanding voice from the bed.

Hilary was anxious about the signs in the girl's face and manner. The injuries to the body were bad enough, but shock was a strange thing. A doctor could not know how it would affect each person.

It was wrong and foolish of her to feel resentment against Violet. She had been a hotheaded, impulsive girl alone in the world. The kindness which Mrs. West had shown her in inviting her for holidays had been treacherously used.

Yet was Violet so much to blame? Hilary thought of John at his most charming, and could feel only pity for the girl.

Two inflammable people together, only John had gone away without realizing the danger and the responsibility. And Violet, out of pride and independence and that contrary spirit which her friend remembered at school, had kept her secret until the fear of death made her betray it.

What would her mother say to this story about John? But she was not supposed to tell. And how would John take the news? He was not hardhearted, he was . . . well, he was just John, set on his own course, taking his pleasure where he found it, charming his companions until he left them to carry any responsibility.

She could not write to him about Violet's situation; if she were to see him, it would be a different matter. She would reserve to herself the right to decide whether to tell him or not. She went out to the car park to find Don Evans huddled down in his seat smoking.

"Well?" he asked.

"I'm worried about her," she said.

"You ought to know, being a med. yourself."

"She's in a very excitable state too. She's bandaged and they will give her some stuff to ease the pain, but . . . oh, I expect . . . I hope it will be all right. Only I feel concerned that I didn't meet her that time we arranged."

"That's got nothing to do with this," said Don comfortably as he started the car. "You couldn't tell that she was going to be crashed into by a fool of a driver who didn't know one side of the road from the other."

Hilary wondered if she had met Violet earlier whether she would have heard her story in a less dramatic fashion. No, she thought, probably Violet would never have told her unless she had felt the threat of death. And now, if she recovered, she might even resent the fact that Hilary knew her secret.

If she recovered.

Her wakeful night was haunted by the distant sound of the Falls—the rushing of the millions of gallons of water which had been going on for hundreds of thousands of years. She grieved for Violet's tragic problem. Human affairs seemed to her painfully small and tragic in comparison with that eternity of rushing water, and at last she fell asleep.

To meet Mark Duncaster the next morning after breakfast was to come out of a bad dream.

"What have you been doing with yourself?" he demanded.

"Do I look as bad as that?" she said mournfully.

"It's those expressive eyes of yours," he told her. "Your most unusual eyes."

Hilary colored.

"I've been very worried about a friend of mine, a girl who was at the reception desk here. I didn't know she was here until we came to lunch with you. She's had a shocking car accident, and I went to see her last night."

"That was distressing for you," he agreed quickly.

"I just want to ask at the desk about her. They will be sure to know."

"Of course. If you want to see her this morning, I can drive you over."

"Thank you. It just depends on the report."

Two of the girls at the reception desk were talking together, their backs turned to her.

As one turned, Hilary saw the tears in the girl's eyes.

"You have news of Violet Fanshawe?" she asked.

"Yes, isn't it terrible? She died early this morning."

"No," exclaimed Hilary. "Oh, no, it isn't possible."

"We rang up first thing. It's too awful to think of. They say it was her heart gave out. But who would have thought it? She was such a vital person."

Hilary turned away blindly. She felt her elbow caught by a firm hand.

"Come along and sit down," said Mark Duncaster's kind voice. "You've bad news."

"Yes, I didn't expect it. Yet I was afraid. I don't know what to do now, without her."

She was thinking of the problem of Belinda thrust so suddenly upon her. One day she might talk to Mark Duncaster about this. But it was not only the secret of the dead Violet. It was John's secret and she could not bring herself to betraying it just now.

Mark Duncaster seemed puzzled at her words.

"But surely there are people to cope with this," he said. "Her people, her relations."

"That's just it, there aren't any. If you don't mind, I must go to the hospital to see if there is anything I can do."

"Of course, I'll take you at once. You know, it's my last day. Plane to Salisbury tomorrow—very early in the morning—"

They went out to the car which he had hired.

Hilary sat with her hands clasped tightly in her lap, shocked and concerned at the future of the innocent and ignorant Belinda. She would have to go and see her, she would have to find out so much, the responsibility must be hers and worst of all, a secret responsibility.

Then she realized what Mark Duncaster had said.

"You're going?" she said. "Of course, I should have realized."

She was silent, looking away from him at the wide sunny street of Livingstone. She felt a desolation she could not express, and again he looked at her curiously.

At the hospital she said, "Perhaps you'd better not wait for me. There will be . . . formalities and telephoning."

"Can't I share it with you?" he asked impetuously.

She shook her head sadly.

"Not this," she said. "It isn't a problem that's over—it's just beginning."

"I'll see you at the hotel then. Or phone me if you want me to fetch you, my dear."

When she telephoned him at lunch time she asked if he would call for her in half an hour.

He thought she looked more composed.

"What time are you going in the morning?" she asked. "I could come and see you off."

"There's a girl," he said enthusiastically. "How did you get on today?"

"The hospital people have been very good. And I've telephoned the solicitor, Mr. Wellingdon. Vi had given his name as well as mine. I shall see him at . . . at the funeral. I . . . I don't want to talk about it any more now."

He took her to lunch with him, and afterwards they sat on the terrace. Don and Emily approached them.

"We were anxious about the news," Emily said appealingly. "A sad thing on your holiday, Hilary."

"The hotel people want me to go through her things," said Hilary in a low voice. "Apparently she had only a couple of cases here. I'll do that later on."

"After all, you hadn't seen her for quite a time," said Don, as if he meant to be comforting. "It isn't as if you were the greatest of friends."

"Could he keep his big mouth shut?" said his wife with exasperation, as Hilary turned away to hide her tears.

"If I'd only talked to her that time when she wanted to see me; I reproach myself."

Hilary looked at Mark Duncaster almost as if she reproached him.

"You couldn't know that she'd be driving on that road just at the moment when a careless drunken driver was there," Don said with impatience.

With the best will in the world he insisted in staying on to

"talk reason and cheer up the poor girl." His wife's suggestions of retreat were in vain.

At last Hilary went to the reception desk and was taken across the sandy compound at the back of the hotel where the women staff had their quarters.

Violet Fanshawe had brought little enough with her—a white coat, several cotton frocks, sandals and slippers. There was only one photograph in a leather folder, that of a child's appealing little face, looking upward with a smile, which recalled John to Hilary's mind. How often she had seen John look cajolingly at her mother like that.

There were two airmail letters from Mrs. Alvina Bott, at the Blue Parrot guest house, Hibiscus Bay, Natal. An acknowledgement of a check, a pleasant, friendly description of the family staying with her, a mention that Belinda's cough was better, and she sent her love to her Auntie and when was she coming to see Belinda? And there were four large childish X's at the bottom of the letter, which apparently needed no explanation, and the sight of which brought that lump to Hilary's throat again.

Hilary sat on the bed with the child's photograph in her hand, perplexed and wondering. She would have to go and see her.

When she returned to the terrace for a welcome "sundowner", it was to find Mark Duncaster surrounded by hotel acquaintances who had discovered that it was his last day. Don was in charge, and in his element, and it was impossible to escape from the talkative circle. Mark Duncaster sent Hilary an apologetic glance.

She was almost relieved at the situation, and yet perversely disappointed that there was to be no opportunity to be together.

But when farewells were said, she said, "Can I come and see you off?"

"So early in the morning?" he teased. "Very well. The car will call for you on the way to the airport."

Somehow the atmosphere between them had changed, and it might be her fault. It was the cloud on her mind, the secret which she could not share. If she could! It was nothing to concern him. Perhaps she would never see him

again. If she did not go to England, their ways might lie apart. The happy days, the days of freedom in the sunshine, in the caressing warmth of the terrace at the Victoria Falls Hotel, the laughter and comradeship of their walks and drives, had passed away as if in a dream.

Or perhaps his natural caution had asserted itself. He had told her of the love affair which had gone wrong. He might hesitate about continuing this one, product of sunshine, a new background, so different from his own.

There was so much to know about him, and now there was no time.

She could not go to sleep for a long while, then had to hurry over her toilet when the tiny alarm clock awakened her from a heavy slumber.

She went out to the entrance of the rest camp just as the hired car arrived with its African driver.

It was a radiant morning, with high blue sky, rustle of leaves, the promise of warmth, and the sound of the Falls. That sound emphasised the flight of time.

"Don't look so sad, my dear."

"I . . . I wish you weren't going. And I shouldn't say that."

She was sitting in the car beside him.

"Why not? That's what I think myself. All this confounded Rhodesian hospitality, I don't blame it, but when did we have the chance to be on our own last night? That's what I wanted."

Hilary leant back against his arm with a sense of comfort. The very fact that Mark Duncaster was not rushing her as he could have done reassured her. The shock of realization of John's behavior had disturbed her more than she knew.

They were driving swiftly out along the road to the airport. He took her hand, and held it as if he could not bear to let it go.

"I hate leaving you," he said in a low voice. "What have you done to me?"

"I . . . I wish you were not going so soon," she murmured.

"Shall I send a wire to St. Antholin's and say detained in Rhodesia?"

They laughed at the suggestion.

At the airport he told the man to wait to take Hilary back when the plane had gone. They went into the pleasant refreshment room which looked over green plants to the tarmac.

Hilary moved as if she were in a dream, only conscious of the tall figure beside her, of the details of his tweed suit, the light coat over his arm, the briefcase which he confided to her for a moment as he searched for change for the African driver. A web was woven round them, a web which neither had sought, and which neither wished to break now.

Now that they sat in the lounge in the white leather chairs and he ordered coffee which they did not want, there were no words to say.

They looked at each other as if they could never tire of the expressive face opposite, as if their longing could embrace each other.

At last the impersonal girlish voice of the announcer broke in giving the number of his flight to Salisbury.

"It seems impossible that tomorrow you will be in London," said Hilary.

They had come to the entrance and she could go no further with him. He took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips as if already he claimed her.

"I . . . I wish we'd met before."

"Good-bye," she whispered, clinging to him in her turn, conscious of the risks of life, of the accident which had taken Violet Fanshawe from all she loved just at the moment when she was needed, conscious that if accident claimed Mark Duncaster, her life would be infinitely poorer.

"Wait here, you won't be able to see me in the plane, but I shall see you. You hold my heart, here, Hilary."

She felt that her eyes, those deep blue-gray eyes were wet with tears, eyes so unusual that he had said he would have known them anywhere.

She stood there at the entrance, watching, waiting until she saw the tall figure crossing the tarmac, reaching the stairway to the airplane turning to wave in her direction. She saw him bend his head as he entered the plane, and then she knew that he was taking his seat, putting his briefcase in the rack. She must wait until the plane went, she

must not lose this last link in the invisible chain which bound them to each other. She watched all the preliminaries, the removal of the stairway, the signals, at last the slow and stately movement of the machine down the runway. She watched its progress, the pause for the signal from the control tower, the speeding-up along the runway and then that heart-lifting movement when, airborne, the machine was mounting to its path thousands of feet above the earth. Child of her generation, used as she was to flying in her country of wide spaces, she still had a thrill in watching the take-off.

Then she turned away to return to her own life.

In the next few days Hilary found her problem assisted by the arrival of Mr. Wellington, from the firm of solicitors in Salisbury who flew up to attend Violet Fanshawe's simple funeral with her.

"Ah, Miss West, ah Dr. West," he said. "Very sad. I suppose you know that you are named executrix of Miss Fanshawe's will? And if the claim against the insurance company comes off—and it should succeed—then there should be a few thousands for her niece. She adopted her when the parents died."

He did not glance at Hilary as he said the last words.

"Adopted?" asked the girl.

"Yes. Apparently the late Miss Fanshawe," the phrase gave the girl a pang at the description of the vivid girl who had been her friend, "adopted this little girl in South Africa, and she is now with Mrs. Bott."

"Yes, I know. I saw the address among her things," said Hilary.

He consulted the papers in his folder.

"Seaside place in Natal. By the way, this letter was for you."

He handed her a long envelope.

"Will you be in Salisbury? There will be several things to settle up. And no doubt things you want to know."

"Yes," said Hilary, holding the long envelope as if it were a treasure. "And I must go and see Belinda now."

"Of course, of course. Well, phone me as soon as you arrive in Salisbury. And . . . er . . . Dr. West. I can advance

reasonable expenses for your visit to Mrs. Bott, necessary in the circumstances."

"Reasonable expenses!" Hilary flamed at the phrase.

"She was my friend," she said.

"Of course, of course. But you are entitled."

The long envelope contained a letter to herself from Violet dated the previous year. She enclosed Belinda's birth certificate, in the name of Fanshawe, a list of her assets, and a businesslike note.

Dear Hilary,

You will not receive this unless I die. You are the only one to know the truth about Belinda. You are the only person I can think of who would care, and who is related. She is John's child. I only write this in case. You were always kind to me. Think kindly of your friend,

Violet

As it happened Hilary was glad of the advance of money which could be made. Her holiday was over, her flight to Durban would take time. She had telephoned her mother at the farm that she could not come home for a few days. When she explained that it was in connection with Violet Fanshawe's affairs, Hilary heard the familiar snort of protest at the other end.

"Vi Fanshawe, indeed? Never answered your letters, got all she could out of you and John, and then waltzed off. It's true, even if the poor girl's dead."

"Mother, you don't understand."

"Too soft, that's what you are. Well, let me know when you'll be home, then Robin can meet you."

Hilary said good-bye to the Evans family and flew to Salisbury.

She went up in the lift in the high building which commanded a view of the other skyscrapers in the city which had grown so fast in its short life of sixty years, and found Mr. Wellingdon in a modern office.

"Ah, Dr. West. I'm afraid this is a sad errand for you.

When Miss Fanshawe talked to me here, sitting in that same chair, I had no idea that this would happen."

"What I can't quite understand is why my friend should have appointed me the guardian," said Hilary slowly. "Someone more experienced—"

He looked up at her from his study of the folder in front of him.

"I pointed that out," he said mildly. "But Miss Fanshawe was a very strong-minded young woman, as no doubt you know. She said that she was saving money, that as soon as the child reached school age she would have her with her, make a home for her."

"But why choose me?"

"May I speak frankly Dr. West?"

She nodded.

"She said she was sure that whatever happened, you would keep a trust. Of course there may have been some other reason—I understood that the mother and father are dead—Miss Fanshawe said that he was dead."

If Mr. Wellingdon suspected any other reason, he was too diplomatic to say it. As the aunt of the child, Hilary would have been the natural guardian. Violet could have meant that the father was dead to her.

Hilary sighed.

"The child can be left with this Mrs. Bott who has had her for so long, I suppose," she said.

"Quite satisfactory. I could make the payments if you wished. Miss Fanshawe had the makings of a fine business woman. But for this unfortunate accident—"

He shook his head while Hilary turned aside to hide the smarting of the tears in her eyes.

One thing she must do, she must go and see Belinda for herself.

III

THE NEXT day, Hilary stepped from the plane into the bright sunshine of the Durban airport. The airport coach took her

into the town itself, where she had time for a quick cup of tea before boarding the bus for the seashore.

Hilary checked Mr. Wellingdon's directions and then asked the driver to stop where the road curved parallel to the bay. Carrying her small bag, she set off toward the white house set on the beach.

She found Mrs. Bott on the verandah, a stout, grey-haired woman with a pleasant face and a welcoming smile. After introductions were made, Mrs. Bott showed Hilary around the simple but comfortable house, taking her to see the flower garden at the back of the house. At the view of the curve of the bay, blue in the sunshine beyond the short lawn, Hilary exclaimed with pleasure.

"Yes, it is nice, isn't it?" said Mrs. Bott complacently. "My husband, poor man, always said that this was one of the best beaches, there's a lagoon, you see. And this was one of the first houses put up here, and now properties are going up all round, and going up in price too."

Hilary sat down in a basket chair on the verandah. A doll was lying in a pathetic attitude on the steps.

"I thought perhaps we'd better have a little talk before you see Belinda," said Mrs. Bott. "So sorry to hear about the dreadful accident to her guardian."

"Her guardian?" questioned Hilary. "Yes, of course, poor Violet."

"Devoted to her niece, she was, you know. Such a tragedy, one after another. The parents killed in a crash, and leaving her the guardian of a six months old baby, and her with her living to earn."

Of course, this was how Violet Fanshawe had contrived to keep her secret.

There was something in the woman's manner which still puzzled her. At first there had been welcome, then there had been a subtle change, a withdrawal.

"Violet has named me as her guardian, and the solicitor who has written to you from Salisbury can continue to make the payments," she explained. "It's very difficult to know what is best to do. You have had Belinda since she was quite small?"

"Yes, Miss Fanshawe brought her here for a little holiday.

I have two cabins here, you know for the holidays, and she came down quite a lot, and Belinda used to play with some of the other children who played here. And then Miss Fanshawe told me about her chance of a job at a hotel in Durban, and about the problem of Belinda, and I said, 'Well, the little dear is used to this place. Why shouldn't she stay on and you come out weekends?' And that's how it was for a while. She's a sweet tempered little thing. I must say her aunt started her off right from the very first."

Her eyes rested almost accusingly on Hilary.

"You haven't told her about . . . about the accident?"

Mrs. Bott was shocked.

"Oh no, I just said Auntie had gone away; she asked only yesterday. Children forget easily."

Hilary thought of the dying Violet's concern for her child.

"Perhaps you'd like to see Belinda now?"

"I would, but just a minute. Do you think, could you carry on the arrangement for a while, say, even for another year? It will be another couple of years before Belinda is ready for school, and—"

"You mean, keep her on here?" asked Mrs. Bott, her eyes narrowing as if in calculation.

"It's so difficult to know what is the best thing to do," said Hilary.

Who was there to consult? John, the father of the child should have been here, to command attention and respect, to give decisions, to take responsibility.

She flushed as she met Mrs. Bott's questioning look.

"There will be some money for her as she grows up," she said. "There's some insurance, I believe, and of course I'll do what I can."

"You'd better see Belinda," said Mrs. Bott.

And she went down the steps calling the child's name.

Hilary had been sitting with her back to the golden shower of creeper. Now she turned and saw that in front of it, putting sand into a blue bucket, and happily tipping it out again was a small girl in an immense sun hat and a scrap of a bathing suit.

She looked round as Mrs. Bott approached, and the sun hat fell off. Mrs. Bott picked her up, then at a wail set her

down in the path, and drew her toward the steps. Hilary went to the terrace and looked down at the two with feelings so mixed that she could hardly disentangle them.

Then she gave a little gasp. The child looked up at her, and they were John's eyes—the deep blue-gray eyes with the dark lashes. Violet Fanshawe might have been her mother, but by those eyes she was certainly John's child.

"Another Auntie, come and see your new Auntie," coaxed Mrs. Bott, in her kindly manner.

Mrs. Bott was being tactful, talking of Aunties. The eyes had given part of the secret away. No denial could prevent Mrs. Bott from observing a family likeness. She might even think that Belinda was Hilary's child.

Hilary smiled sadly at the thought.

Oh, well, what did that matter in this remote sunny sheltered haven?

The child could stay here until she was old enough to go to school.

Belinda came reluctantly up the last two steps, clutching the blue bucket with affection. Her sunbrowned limbs were shapely, her little face round and chubby, her hair was clean and shining, piled up on her head with a pink ribbon.

Watching her, Hilary could not help a smile of realization at the oddity of family resemblance. The way the child planted her feet on the steps and now on the verandah floor was just like John's walk.

"Hullo, Belinda," she said gently, and put out a hand.

Belinda hesitated between the claims of the hand she knew, the blue bucket, and the newcomer. The effort of decision was great. Finally she released Mrs. Bott's hand and moved towards Hilary with curiosity.

"Taken to you, she has and no wonder," said Mrs. Bott significantly. "It's time for her milk. I'll get it. And would you like some tea?"

"Thank you," said Hilary, and she was alone with John's child.

Hilary did not hurry her; she waited smiling.

After some consideration, Belinda climbed on to the arm of Hilary's chair, then slid one warm bare leg on to the friendly lap. When the girl held that weight, and saw the

lovely eyes raised to her in questioning, she clutched her in her arms.

Oh, John, why didn't you marry Violet? Why didn't you tell my mother, make the best of it, save Violet from all these lies and deceits, perhaps even prevent her tragic death? she thought bitterly. Now it's too late.

Lots of people are too sensible to blame the child for the fault of her parents, but she's missing the home that should have been, the father and mother to build that wall of security around her.

Hilary felt a confusion of resentment and anger, of attraction to the child. What would Belinda's future be? She must tell John, Hilary thought, whatever her promise to the child's mother. Something must be done for her.

For one wild moment she thought of her mother, and then she knew with a sigh that that position would be intolerable. How could her mother take on the responsibility of a young child, with the farm and Robin? There would be questions, there would be difficulties. It would not be as suitable as this place by the sea with Mrs. Bott.

The only person who could be responsible for Belinda until the father took it over, and John should do that, she decided firmly, was herself. And how could she do that, with her own career ahead of her? Not only her career ahead of her, but also the hope that Mark Duncaster's love might lead her on to a very different life.

Belinda was leaning confidingly against her, responding to the warmth of the arms that held her, staring up with curiosity and flapping the blue bucket against Hilary's elbow. She prattled about the bucket, the sand between her toes, the sick doll on the steps. Then she toddled off to the engrossing occupation of sliding down the verandah rail, climbing the steps, and sliding down again. She flopped over on to her plump behind as Mrs. Bott appeared with a tray.

"She looks quite healthy," said Hilary as she accepted a cup of tea.

"Of course she's healthy," said Mrs. Bott affronted. "She does get a little out of breath, I've noticed sometimes, running down to the sands and back. And she's had one or two nasty colds, but she throws them off quite soon."

Hilary studied the child carefully, her professional interest excited.

"You have a doctor for her?"

"Never needed one," said Mrs. Bott strongly. "She'll grow out of this little weakness, I'm sure. And Miss Fanshawe, her aunt, never grumbled about anything."

Hilary did not remind the woman that Violet Fanshawe had not had the professional knowledge to make her wish to check an impression.

"Please don't think I'm grumbling," she said gently. "I can see that you've done your best with her. She's well and happy obviously."

"Because of course if you're not satisfied, you can always take her away and make your own arrangements," said Mrs. Bott, with all the cruelty of a woman aroused by a slight on her efficency.

Hilary was appalled.

"But I wouldn't want to take her away from you," she exclaimed. "This is her home, you say there are other children near for her to play with. I am her guardian now, but the difficulty I'm thinking about is that I don't know where I may be. I shall be along way away from Belinda, in any case."

"If I've had her for three years, and you've never bothered about her before, and it's all been quite satisfactory," said Mrs. Bott firmly, "I don't see why you should worry now."

Hilary gazed at her, and her eyes were more pleading than she knew.

"It is my responsibility," she said. "Her . . . Miss Fanshawe appointed me her guardian. I want to do the best I can for her."

"Well, you'll be sure that I shall," said Mrs. Bott heartily. "I'm as fond of her as if she were my own. It's a pity Miss Fanshawe hadn't some older relations."

She gazed accusingly at Hilary as if it were her fault that Violet Fanshawe had been a lonely girl. For a second Hilary played with the idea of confiding in the woman the secret of Belinda's birth, but then she thought of Violet. She had kept the secret well. It would not be fair.

To hide her confusion she called Belinda to her, and the child, clasping her mug of milk in both hands, came slowly towards her. She offered Hilary the mug and prattled happily about the dog next door, while Mrs. Bott looked on with an indulgent smile. She seemed to be treating Belinda fairly, to be fond of her. For the moment she was the solution, but Hilary felt a longing to have Belinda with her, to have the chance of watching her grow, to hear her happy little voice. If she ever had children of her own, she would want to have Belinda with her. She wondered if she would ever have thought that if it had not been for Mark Duncaster. He had no part in this; he could never have anything to do with Belinda. Again she sighed.

The vow to Violet was not the only link. She was drawn to Belinda by blood and by a new-born affection.

"You say you might be going away overseas?" asked Mrs. Bott curiously.

"It's possible that I shall have a medical appointment there," said Hilary. "I did apply, but I haven't heard yet."

Mrs. Bott eyed the girl with speculation.

"You said you wanted a room nearby for a day or two."

"Yes, I thought I ought to get to know Belinda, and there are plenty of hotels along the coast."

Mrs. Bott hesitated.

"I just wondered whether you'd like one of my cabins here—very simple, but it's clean and it has its own shower and toilet."

"Stay here? I'd like that," said Hilary enthusiastically.

"I kept one empty for my sister who's coming out from England on a visit, but she won't be here now for a week or so. Maybe longer. Her husband died, and she's clearing up affairs. Of course I'd rather have gone home to her. I still feel a bit homesick for England, but it can't be done."

Mrs. Bott was voluble now and smiling. "Years since we met. She used to be a nurse, has done a bit of part-time work. Now I'll show you the cabin first before you make up your mind."

But Hilary's mind was already made up before she saw the neat little cabin with its mosquito curtained bed, its tiny bathroom and long window looking over the bay.

"I brought just my night things," she said. "But I must get a swimming suit now."

In that she lived for the rest of the day and the next, playing with Belinda in the lagoon netted against sharks, and sharing Mrs. Bott's meals. The other cabin would not be occupied until the weekend. Belinda accepted her confidingly, brought the sick doll to be made better, and when it was better, abandoned it heartlessly for a white fur monkey which was leaking sawdust.

"Likes 'em better sick," said Mrs. Bott tolerantly.

Hilary would not have believed that she could feel so regretful at leaving the child, but now she must catch the bus to take her into Durban so that she could pick up the airport coach.

"Lot of traveling for you before you get home," said Mrs. Bott. "Say good-bye to your Auntie, Belinda."

The little girl brought her the treasured blue bucket.

"No," she said, clutching Hilary round the knees. "No. Play with Belinda."

"I wish I could," said the girl. "I'll come again, when I can, Belinda. Good-bye."

The child's face puckered to cry in protest, and the likeness to John was amazing. The stronger features of the male, crinkled in protest when his horse had failed at a jump were now reproduced in a smaller feminine face.

Again Hilary felt reluctance to leave the child. She longed to pick her up in her arms, run away with her, give her the love and companionship which her father and mother had denied her. Violet in her lonely pride had endeavored to give the child what she needed.

But she had cut her off from John and that responsibility would have been good for him, thought Hilary.

She remembered that little confiding hand during her flight from Durban. After the shorter flight from Salisbury to her home township, her brother Robin met her with the Land Rover. As they rattled along the strip road, she found that he snatched a curious glance at her.

"What's up?" asked Robin bluntly, swerving off the tarmac strip in the center of the road to give half the space to a truck driven by a cheerful African who waved acknowledgement.

Hilary endured the red dust with the equanimity of habit.

"Things on my mind," she answered.

"You want to to go England?" he asked.

"John would have said 'go home,' " she said, and realized that the difference in their ages had weakened the link with the country from which their grandmother had come.

She sighed.

"Yes, I'm torn in two. If I had an answer to that last application, I suppose I'd go."

"Don't know what's the matter with the place," he said. "If the girls don't get married, they're all just hopping mad to go to England. Can't see it myself. Too crowded for me."

"You've never been, you don't know," said Hilary, and was surprised to find that she was defending what she had attacked when she was with Mark Duncaster.

She looked round at the scrub country, the "bundu" she loved, the masses of gray rocks of all shapes and sizes among the stunted trees, the leaves already changing to the color of spring, the red-gold copper of the msasa trees which seemed to shine against the cloudless blue of the sky.

"Mum's been expecting it," said Robin. "But she won't like it. First old John, and now possibly you. But I'll stay on. I'm the one that matters here now."

The road had mounted gradually, and in the distance Hilary saw the rocks which marked the turn off. Now they were running on a dirt road with low trees on either side.

"They've built a new pavilion at the sports club," Robin said cheerfully. "Don Evans said you were off with a chap from England most of the time."

Hilary smiled and was silent.

Now they had turned in at a gate beyond the familiar milking sheds and Robin swung the car round to rest under a grass roof. The dogs rushed to meet them. Robin did not need to call, for from the end of the verandah appeared Mrs. West. Hilary went to her and hugged her.

Elizabeth West was a tall, active woman, her skin browned by the open air, her hair turning gray on her well-shaped head. A wool coat was flung round her shoulders.

"Josiah is just making the tea," she announced. "You look well, Hilary. Had a good time?"

"Yes, yes, wonderful," the girl answered, conscious of how much had happened since she left home. "Did Don and Emily tell you about it? Only there was this sad business of Violet."

"Yes, the Evans came in the other evening. And you made a new friend?"

Her mother's tone was crisp, but Hilary knew that she was critical. Never before had she felt division between them, and she knew that part of it was this love growing in her, this reaching out for another life, as well as the secret of Belinda. She did not know how she was going to endure the keeping of the secret here, at home, in the familiar surrounds of the verandah with its shelf of plants, the blossoms of the moon-flower bush falling on the patch of lawn.

Josiah, the African servant who had been with the family for so many years, came in noiselessly on his bare feet from the kitchen with the tray of morning tea, and Hilary noticed that he had taken on himself to put out the best teacups.

"Morning, Josiah," she said gaily, and his black face beamed at her.

Robin stood by the tray, cup in hand.

"You've grown taller still," Hilary accused him.

"Well, Dad was tall," he said.

His stature might be that of his father, but his eyes were his mother's; clear, rather small, and deep-set gray. Hilary thought with a sense of accusation of John's appealing eyes, repeated in those of his unknown daughter.

She had to talk about the Victoria Falls, about the rest camp, about her meeting with Mark Duncaster.

"Have to go, got to see about the new dam," said Robin impatiently.

"What time will you be in?" his mother called after him.

"When you see me," he replied in lordly manner, and both women laughed as he went away.

Her mother had been gardening. She had constructed, over the years, a vegetable garden beside the small stream which ran down to the dam. Hilary remembered as a child that after an argument between her father and mother Mrs. West had set her lips tightly and gone to weed carrots,

to work with a feverish zest at the shadowed patch which gave them some food.

"Didn't tell you, letter in the mail for you yesterday," her mother said. "Didn't know where to send it. Why did you go off like that?"

"It was as I wrote, Violet died, in an accident. She had talked to me and I found she'd wanted me to do some business for her. I couldn't very well refuse, and I could handle it better flying straight away from Salisbury than coming home and going on from there."

"Violet, poor girl," mused her mother. "The one that John was so keen on years ago. Good thing he didn't go any farther. Never liked her background."

"Had she got any?" Hilary defended her friend.

"No one knew who her father was."

"That was not her fault. I . . . I was fond of her."

Hilary's voice thickened. A wave of sadness flowed over her, at the sudden end to a vivid girl's life, at the pride and independence which had dictated an unnatural loneliness, at John's lightness, at the silence imposed on her. Everything around was the same, the deep old couch on the verandah, the pile of farming journals slipping off the shelf which John had made as a boy, the photograph of her smiling handsome father.

"There, Hilary, don't upset yourself," her mother said briskly, but not unkindly. "I was glad when that girl went away. Thought that John might make a fool of himself over her, relieved that he didn't. And then before he knew it, he'd have been tied up. There's your letter."

Hilary opened the air mail envelope with a sense that life was running along too quickly for her.

"It's from St. Antholin's," she said, after a pause. "They've accepted my application. It means I can go to England."

IV

So FATE had decided. She was quickened, delighted, half-frightened at the speed with which her life had changed. And

she would see Mark Duncaster again. She was glad she had not told him before.

"Mother, you do understand, don't you?" she pleaded. "It's a wonderful chance, one of the best hospitals there is. I shall learn so much, and of course the pay is good. You get a wide experience there. I—"

"Is that where this doctor friends of yours is working?"

Hilary felt the blood rising to her cheeks.

"Yes, he is, but that . . . that has nothing to do with it."

"Nothing to do with you wanting to go there? Nonsense, Hilary, don't draw wool over my eyes. Anyway, I'm not stopping you. I couldn't stop John, and it was worse losing him."

Hilary began to laugh.

"You do say such funny things, Mother."

"At least you are going on your own line, and standing on your own feet, but he cadged on your father's relations. That's what I never did hold with, and never shall. Cadging, I call it."

There ran in Mrs. West's voice the pride of the daughter of a pioneer who had arrived in a desolate country with nothing but his rifle, who had worked on a railway, had burnt bush, had shot wild animals, had created a home.

"It was seeing that piece in the newspaper about Roger Fennell, it was the link which interested him," defended Hilary.

"To see what he could get out of it, without working for it," snapped her mother. "Don't imagine I don't see through John. He's his father over again. Getting out of things and leaving other people to carry the can is what I can't abide. Mrs. Leaver showed me some pictures from a magazine her niece sends her from England, and there was John as large as life at some horse show with a lot of girls."

"He's always popular. People like him, and he wanted a different life."

"At someone else's expense. He's after what the old boy has to leave, I've no doubt."

"Mothers are supposed to have a soft corner for their first born, and a boy," teased Hilary.

"I haven't forgotten how and when he was born," said

her mother. "Your father had that craze for gold-mining then. Not so easy for me. If John had it hard enough for the first few years, maybe that's why he wants it soft now. And now you're going. You'll get a better job there no doubt, but I hope you stand on your own feet." She stood up herself, and called, "Josiah, take the tea things away."

Hilary had to telephone to the airways, to inquire about her flight to England. The planes were full, she must wait. She wrote to Mr. Wellingdon and to Mrs. Bott. The last two letters she posted herself in the small town, hating the secrecy. The note to John brought a cabled reply that he would meet her at the airport, and that her great uncle insisted that she must stay with him on arrival.

Hilary wrote an air letter to Mark Duncaster, a few words to say that she would be coming to St. Antholin's, to give him her brother's address, keeping out of the letter the joy that bubbled in her.

Then she must visit neighbors, attend a couple of "sundowner" parties, turn out some of her belongings from her old room, pack her case, and plan what should be sent after her as unaccompanied baggage.

If it had not been for the turmoil of preparations, Hilary would have been sorely tempted to confide the secret of Belinda to her mother. Mrs. West's efficiency in running the household, in preparations, in feeding Robin, in suggestions, all refused, for Hilary's wardrobe, their lively visitors, gave no time for confidences.

"Now there are these photos John took a few years ago, wouldn't you be wanting to take some of these?" she asked. "You'll be a long way from home."

"You can send them after me. After all, the distance is only a day in time, twenty four hours now," Hilary pointed out with the indifference of the young.

"Spending your salary before you get it. And flying all these thousands of miles. Can't get used to it," said her mother. "When I was a girl—"

"Cut it out, Mum," urged Robin, extending his feet to the wood fire which burned, on a chilly evening, in the big fireplace. "Your chicks are leaving you. Make a fuss of the

one that doesn't. But I bet you think more of John and Hilary than you do of me."

"Never say that. And how do I treat you?" demanded his mother.

They laughed at the familiar wrangle.

On the last morning, Hilary wandered out from her room to the verandah. Josiah had placed the tray of early morning tea on the old chest of drawers. This morning she loved every detail of her home, the coo of the white doves in the aviary, the gurgle of the stream, the clink of pails from the dairy, the barking of a dog, the chatter of Africans bicycling by from the native reserve on their way to work.

She was going to a new environment; there was excitement and fear in it. No, there must be no fear. She would have the joy of seeing Mark Duncaster again—his caution might have changed. And she smiled with a sense of girlish power. Their absence from each other might have changed the attraction between them. She wanted to see him again desperately; she would admit that to herself, but she would never admit that to him . . . at least not yet.

After a lavish breakfast of bacon and eggs, they set off, her mother giving Josiah and the garden boy last minute instructions in kitchen Kaffir.

Hilary waved as the car turned out of the gate. There were the usual piccaninns on their way to school, not reluctant as their European cousins might have been, but eager and alert.

"You never love things so much until the time comes to leave them," she said.

Robin groaned.

"Save us from sentiment," he answered. "Going to better yourself, like John. Don't tell me anything else."

They had lunch by the wayside, since Hilary had chosen that, recalling other picnics. It was a fresh morning, the sky of a blue transparency, the light so clear that the distant hills were like a line drawing. There was the familiar dry scent of bush, the faint flavor of the burnings of yesterday.

Her mother was quiet, except for last minute inquiries as to whether Hilary had packed everything she needed.

It was when they were at the airport in the early afternoon

that Robin said, "Have you had anything else on your mind, Hilary? It's all right, Mum's over there getting you some magazines. This chap, is he any good? Mum thinks you're going to get married. That's why she's in the dumps."

"I don't know, I can't tell. . . . I'm sure I can't say." Hilary was flustered by this sudden perspicacity in her younger brother.

"Well, I know the signs—gazing into the distance and sighing and not answering when people speak to you. Same as old John, that time when Vi Fanshawe stayed with us. Sad about her. But I thought you'd got the same complaint—call it *luv*."

"Did you think he was in love with her?" Hilary asked.

Robin shrugged his shoulders.

"As much as he'd be in love with anyone. Likes people to love him and run after him. Pretty shaken, I think. I'm not going in for that sort of thing. Much better to be free."

Hilary nodded gravely, glad that he had left the subject of John.

Now the announcer's call was made, "Passengers for the flight to Entebbe and London" and the moment had come to say good-bye. She put her arms round her mother, and could not speak. Speed across the world, dangers for both of them, and now so many words left unsaid. Only the trite phrase, "Take care of yourself," meant so much to each one.

"So long, old girl. If you get in a hole, call on me," said Robin loftily, and she could have hit him for his assumption of authority if she had not seen the glint in his eyes.

Then she was in the line of passengers crossing the tarmac to the great airplane. She was turning, trying to see the familiar figures on the terrace. From the top of the stairway to the plane, where the air-hostess in her neat uniform, with cocked hat and white gloves was waiting, she looked back again. Once she was in her seat, she knew they could not see her. Now she waved the green scarf which her mother had given her, and saw an answering wave.

Now she was off and away, the airplane mounting, flying over the dun-colored land, the streaks that were roads, the mushroom colored dots that were the huts of the Africans.

Hilary slept and woke. She found tropical darkness a relief, marveled at the expanse of desert below, and once over the Mediterranean, had an impatient longing for arrival. She combed her hair before the mirror in the toilet compartment, and smiled at her tired reflection.

She was coming to England, of which she had read and heard so much, which so many of her people called "home", to the country where she would see Mark Duncaster again.

Would she be able to see him at St. Antholin's?

Their positions would be very different in a great hospital of course; he was an important person, and she might be in charge of only one small ward.

Excitedly she went back to her seat to try to look down through a featherbed of white clouds. Once they were torn aside, and she saw, thousands of feet below, a miniature patchwork of fields and hedges, green in mild sunlight, roads on which moved tiny beetles of cars. Then the clouds closed up again.

Now the airplane was spiraling down in response to mysterious signals. Down, down, a tilt of the great shining wing showed buildings, grass, a long runway.

She had arrived.

The formalities were over; she was walking into the hall and there were her brother John and beside him an older man, who must be the famous great uncle.

"Hilary, my dear, how glad I am to see you," said John, more formally than he would have done in the old days.

He kissed her cheek warmly.

"Let me take your bag. Here's Hilary, sir."

She could not help staring at Roger Fennell with amazement. The words great uncle had suggested age and infirmity to her. To her astonishment she saw a man with closely-cut gray hair, a firm chin, a sun-browned skin with wrinkles which did not seem to matter. He had a walking stick, but more of an adornment or a habit, it would seem, than a necessity.

Like John he was well-dressed in a way which struck Hilary after the casual fashion of young Robin. Tweeds, yes, but tweeds cut to fit, to be discreet in color, with a hint of

cuff and collar which seemed to set off the material, and brown shoes with a gloss.

"Welcome to England," said Roger Fennell. He had cold eyes, thought Hilary, but his manner was correct.

He might welcome John, as a possible heir, but he probably didn't like women, and possibly not women doctors.

They had her suitcase collected. John helped her on with her green topcoat, for the air seemed cold to her, and they went out to a long black car, where a chauffeur sprang to open the door for them.

"Shall I drive, sir?" asked John.

"You'll want to talk to your sister. I'll take the wheel."

This was not what Hilary had imagined. The long expensive car, John beside her, and at the wheel, beside an impassive chauffeur, the brother of her grandmother. Mr. Fennell drove fast and well; he took his way through the traffic as if he were used to having his own way, as if he would do the correct thing, but almost with contempt.

Hilary settled into the corner of the luxurious car with a smile at John. He pulled a fur rug over her knees.

"I'll put the heater on," said the great uncle. "You're bound to feel the cold."

Hilary looked out at the rows of houses, the speeding traffic. All the things she had to say to John seemed perfunctory. But he was taking the lead, smiling at her in the old affectionate way.

"Good to see you, old girl," he said. "How's Mother? How is young Robin shaping?"

And in the surge of home news she almost forgot the story she had to tell him.

He was good-looking, she thought; he had a charm and appeal which was unusual. But he kept an eye on his uncle, she was sure. Not for the first time Hilary felt that John was anxious to please. Pleasing had come naturally to him since he was a boy; his mother had blamed him for that ease which had given him free rides on horses and in cars in the days when both had been scarce.

"One day you'll find out that smiles aren't the only way to get things," she had said. "Earning them yourself is the best."

It was a mild morning with a soft light. Trees were in full golden leaf, in gardens they passed there were green shrubs and bushes in flower which she did not know. She felt confused at this sudden transit to a world so different from the one she had left.

They had moved along the main roads; now when they reached Kensington, the car swung off to stop in a wide avenue of porticoed houses, where a bombed space had been filled with a modern mansion which seemed to consist of shining glass.

They drew up at the imposing door, the chauffeur sprang out to open the car door, and Hilary stepped out.

The wide hall had paneled walls, with concealed lighting, a rich carpet and an electric fire aglow. The luggage arrived as if by magic, the bronze grille of the lift gates opened and Hilary and the two men were wafted up to the top story.

Hilary smiled to herself. She would enjoy writing this description to her mother, who had always slept on the ground floor.

The lift stopped at the top floor, where another wide corridor emphasized the money that mere space cost. In a moment they passed through a glass door into a room with roses before a window which opened on to a balcony, but a balcony with glass walls, so that a view of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens lay far below them. The trees had a variety of coloring; green, pale and darked shades, and on the green grass were whitish blobs which were grazing sheep.

"We're having a late breakfast or an early lunch," said Mr. Fennell. "Show your sister her room, John. We shall be ready in five minutes, tell Manrico."

John led the way along a corridor into a bedroom which took Hilary's breath away by its luxury.

From the Chinese wallpaper and the satin bedcover she turned on her brother.

"Is he a millionaire?" she asked in a whisper. "I'm quite frightened, John, lap of luxury indeed!"

"Good, isn't it?" he said with satisfaction. "Your own bathroom, and here's your wardrobe." He opened a concealed door which looked as if it were part of the Chinese wallpaper, and

revealed an immense space with drawers, racks for shoes, and padded hangers.

Hilary laughed.

"He doesn't know the extent of my wardrobe then, and coming by air, too," she said.

"Be nice to him, Hilary," said John in a low tone. "A lot depends on it, old girl. I'm relying on you."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I must just do my face."

"We'll talk afterwards," he said hurriedly. "And he's mad on punctuality."

Punctuality, thought Hilary, with a longing for the call of Josiah from the verandah.

A few moments after he had gone, a silver chime rang out.

She found her way along the carpeted corridor to a warm dining room where the coffee smelt delicious, and a dark-skinned man servant waited at attention beside a side table where electric hot plates kept the food at the perfect temperature.

Hilary enjoyed the meal, but she noticed that her Great Uncle Roger's lips compressed in a tight line when she spoke of her home.

"I suppose you will want the morning off to show your sister round," he said with a mixture of geniality and determination which Hilary recognized as misleading.

"Just as you say, sir; I'll come along to the office if you wish," said John cheerfully.

John ready to give up a morning's pleasure for business! This was surprising, and her expression drew comment from Roger.

"No doubt you'll want a rest after your journey, Hilary. We shall be back to lunch at two o'clock. Then I can get in my round of golf. We'll see you this afternoon."

So she was to be denied the pleasure of John's company almost as soon as she arrived. She caught John's rueful expression.

"Yes, that will be all right," she said gaily. "I'll sleep in that heavenly bed, and see you both later on. On Monday of course I'll be moving into the hospital."

Roger Fennell swung round from the door.

"I quite anticipated that you would be staying here."

"I should be near the hospital. I expect I shall be resident," said Hilary quietly.

Behind Roger stood John, and he was obviously telegraphing a warning to her, but Hilary was not going to endure an affront to her independent spirit. Besides, there must be the chance of seeing Mark Duncaster again. He had this address, for she had given it to him in her air letter, but if she were to remain here she realized that she would not be as free as she would at the hospital.

The elder man and the girl stared at each other, and Hilary smiled, more calmly than she felt.

It seemed that he hesitated. Used as he was to having his own way, he did not enjoy this slight resistance from a girl, a young relative and a stranger.

"Well, we will see," he temporized and went swiftly out of the room.

John came back to say, in a low voice, "See what I mean? We'll have a chat later on. Better to play ball with him."

They were gone, and Hilary was free to collect her impressions of the luxurious, efficient household. When she went to her own room, a dark-skinned young woman, obviously the wife of the manservant, and of the same nationality, came to take clothes for pressing.

"Lap of luxury," thought Hilary. "Mother would say that John 'fell in soft'. I wonder . . , I wonder if the position really suits him."

She bathed and lay down on the bed, wondering before she fell asleep, how John would take the news about his child Belinda. And she wondered even more what Uncle Roger would say if he knew. It was not for her to tell him; that must be John's affair.

She awoke to find rain beating against her window. She dressed and went into the long lounge, glad of the central heating, and was standing by the window when there was the sound of a door being opened and a familiar footstep.

John burst in smiling.

"Left the old boy at the club. Golf is off, thank goodness. Now let's have all the news. How's Mother? Is she still bearing a grudge against me because of my finding myself a job with a rich uncle?"

"Of course not," said Hilary. "You have to make your own life, we all know that. She sold some of the pasture; too much to manage. There is something I want to talk to you about, John."

"Robin's birthday? Look what I've got for him." He put his hand in his pocket and brought out a small square box. He opened it, and there was a watch with a flexible bracelet, a neat, simple masculine affair which would delight Robin's heart, she knew.

"It was very expensive, wasn't it?" she asked. "Robin will love it, of course, but John, could you afford it? You're paid a salary, I suppose?"

His handsome young face clouded slightly.

"Well, not exactly. I have what is called an allowance, but I suppose it could stop at any moment. He likes the whip-hand, you see."

"He isn't sure that you're worth it?" asked Hilary indignantly. "Is that good enough for you, John?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"But look at all this. I live here, go about with him, drive the cars—he's got a couple of beauties—I've got the run of everything. I'm playing low at the moment, but I hope to touch him for a bit later on, to come to some agreement, to settle something, maybe. Don't look like that, Hil, old girl. For a moment you looked like Mother when she was cross with me."

"Yes, I am, and I don't care if I do look like Mother," said Hilary. "It's all so . . . so intangible. You're not standing on your own feet."

"Like a Rhodesian, and like Mum's father who went out to the bush and made himself a farm out of nothing, and was sold up a couple of times when the tobacco market fell in, and worked on the railway," mimicked John with such maddening accuracy of her mother's tone that Hilary had to laugh in spite of herself.

"John, you really shouldn't. You're doing the wrong thing, I'm sure. You're . . . you must listen to me now."

Her heart was beating fast as she remembered Violet and her words when dying.

"You must listen to me now," she said seriously. "Do you remember Violet Fanshawe?"

She was watching his face very carefully, and she saw no expression there but one of a friendly interest.

"Sure I do. Kid with red hair, pal of yours came to the farm a few years ago."

"John." Hilary hesitated. "She's dead."

"No," he exclaimed, and she could see that he was shocked and touched. "No, surely not! She was quite young. What in the world happened?"

There was nothing but the most natural concern in his words, no suggestion of any other emotion. But four, nearly five, years ago was a long time in John's life.

"She was hurt in a car accident. She was at Victoria Falls when I was there. I saw her when she was dying. I was afraid then. But it isn't only that, John, you had an affair with her and—"

She blundered on, "I expect you'll say that it isn't my business, but it is, John. She had a child, your child, Belinda. I've seen her. She is your child, John. What are you going to do about it?"

V

SHE HAD shocked him into silence. His eyes were hard and angry in the sudden pallor of his face.

"Where did you get that idea?" he asked harshly.

"Don't be so foolish, John," she answered. "We all thought you were fond of each other. But she went away, and then you tried those other jobs, and wrote to your Uncle Roger, and all the time that poor girl was struggling on. She was too proud, too darned independent to write to you. You left her high and dry; you never cared any more. Oh, John how could you?"

He had turned away as if he could not bear her accusing eyes. Now he strode to the window.

"Look here, how do you know she was telling the truth?"

His voice sounded strained, as if he did not believe the words he spoke.

"She was dying, she was afraid, she wanted to tell me because she had made me the guardian of the child."

"Good God, why?"

"If you saw the little girl, you'd see why. She's one of the family—she has your eyes, John. What are we going to do about her?"

There was silence in the warm room. Hilary felt almost sick. The meeting was not going as she had hoped.

"You know, old girl, this is a bit of a shock," he muttered. "Vi and I . . . well, you know how it is."

"You didn't bother, you dropped her. You weren't going on with it; you didn't care what a hole she was in."

"We never talked about marriage. We were a couple of young fools. I never knew that she was in that kind of a hole. This is a bit of a blow, Hilary."

The girl felt as if she were talking to a stranger, not to the brother she loved. He was concerned, but not with the fate of Violet, whom he had desired and who had given herself to him, not with curiosity about the child who was his. He was thinking of the effect of the discovery on his own way of life.

She had to keep quiet for a moment, or she thought she would have lashed out at him with words of blame.

She could only repeat lamely, "How could you?"

Looking across the luxurious room, so unlike the home they had both known, she was confused by the memories they had shared, and the fact that they were now strangers to each other.

"You would stand up for Vi," he said over his shoulder. "We were in it for the fun of the thing. She was the same as I was, there wasn't any more to it than that."

"That's not true, John, and you know it," defended Hilary. "We all thought that Vi cared about you that holiday all those years ago. Then the whole thing fizzled out, as we thought. Didn't she tell you? Didn't she write to you? You must have known the chances."

John swung round angrily.

"Why the devil should you badger me like this? It's my

own affair, isn't it? What do you expect me to do now? I'm sorry she's dead but . . . well what can I do?"

Hilary was repulsed at the revelation of his thought. Cold, cold where it concerned another, set on his own advantage. And she thought suddenly, that's why I didn't like Uncle Roger Fennell, because he's the same sort as John; he'll use him for his own ends, and then—

"What is the arrangement between you and Uncle Roger?" she asked urgently. "I mean, if he has promised you something, but he doesn't keep his promise, where are you then? John, it is important."

"That's just it, I don't know. Several times he's said that he'd make a settlement on me."

"Something in his will?" asked Hilary scornfully. "And he's young for his age, and may go on for many years. Then where are you?"

"That's why he mustn't know this. You won't let on, will you, Hilary? He'd be down on that sort of thing, especially now."

Hilary was so annoyed at his suggestion that she should have dreamed of telling his uncle that for a moment she did not notice the end of the sentence.

"How could you imagine that I should go straight to him and tell him? I'm not so proud of the story. It was difficult enough not to tell Mother, but I promised Violet."

There was a lift of his head as if in relief at the news.

"Good old Hilary," he said. "You didn't tell anyone. Always rely on you. Who's paying for her?"

"John," she cried. "Don't you understand? It isn't only the money—of course, there's the money that Vi left, the insurance and then the claim after the accident. There's Belinda, the child, a person, who needs a home, who will have to be looked after. I stayed there a couple of days, to get to know her. It's all right now with this Mrs. Bott, but she will need a home, she will need you." She stopped at the look of horror on his face.

"But I can't do that, of course I can't." He changed his ground rapidly. "It wasn't what Vi wanted anyway. The kid had far better stay where she is, with some woman who understands children."

"You certainly have changed," said Hilary sadly. "Unless I never knew what you were like before. But what is to be done?"

"Leave it alone. What did you say about her money? How did it happen that she had any to leave? She never spoke about it," said John curiously.

"She'd insured her life quite heavily. Then she worked as receptionist in hotels, she could live in for the last couple of years, I imagine."

He thrust his hands deep into his pockets.

"Poor little Vi. It doesn't seem like her. She was so gay."

"I suppose the experience changed her," Hilary commented bitterly. "That's why she kept away from me, never answered my letters, and if it hadn't been for the accident of meeting her at the hotel at the Falls, I don't suppose we ever should have known. Except when I heard that I was to be her executrix and Belinda's guardian. John, if you saw the little girl."

"Look, you can send some money from me, a bit later on, if it's needed," he said awkwardly. "But you can see how I'm placed. What could I possibly do for her?"

It was plain that no responsibility was to be taken by him.

"There's another thing," he went on, still with that air of constraint. "There's no chance of anyone identifying me with her? I mean, you didn't let on about me? You stayed at the place with her for a couple of days? Was that wise?"

"I don't care whether it was wise or not," said Hilary hotly. "Vi was my friend, she gave me a trust, and I have to carry it out. She must have known you better than I did."

Then the tears mounted to her eyes. Her bitter disappointment at the way in which he had received the news, the revelation of his cold-heartedness, the loss of the childish love and admiration she had had for him, found release in weeping.

John was beside her in an instant, putting his arm round her.

"There, there," he said in the old way. "Silly old Hil. Wipe your eyes, honey. No girl looks her best crying."

"I almost wish I hadn't told you," she snapped at him.

The door opened and their uncle came in.

"Hullo," he said. "Sorry. Am I intruding? Has something

upset Hilary? John, we've visitors. I've brought them back from the club. And we've picked up old Medwin and his sisters and Elspeth."

"It's nothing," said Hilary quickly, blinking back the tears, conscious of how foolish she must look. "John and I were talking about the old days."

She knew the reference had displeased him. She would be glad when she had left this flat, luxurious as it was, and could be herself, Dr. Hilary West in her own world at St. Antholin's.

"I'll be back in a moment," she said. "Forgive me, I must change my frock," and fled to her own room.

There at least she could weep and wash the tears from her eyes.

She had broken her promise to Vi, but she was too sensible to regret that. She could not have held back the truth from him. But she was horrified at his reception of the news and she longed to get away from this place which was no home to her.

With powder and lipstick she removed the traces of disturbance, and hurried back to the lounge.

There were many people there, laughing and talking; two big men in golfing clothes, a thin, cheerful little man with an enormous mustache, several talkative women comparing fashion notes, and with them two girls.

"Mr. Medwin, Dr. Hilary West, John's sister." Roger Fennell was doing the introductions with a composure which could to Hilary's excited fancy suggest dislike.

The man he had called "old Medwin" was not much older than himself, a big, gray haired man with stooping shoulders and a booming voice.

"John's sister, eh? You must come down and see us. Elspeth, my granddaughter, will arrange it. Know anything about sailing?"

"Very little, I'm afraid," said Hilary.

Other introductions were made; she smiled but did not retain names. Tea was served, but drinks were circulated.

One of the girls, in a light-weight tweed frock, who was standing between Roger Fennell and John, smiled across

to her, but just as the girl was approaching her, the manservant came to Hilary.

"It is a telephone call for you, signorina," he said.

"For me?"

The color flowed into Hilary's cheeks. Only one person knew her address. She tried to restrain her pace through the crowded room.

"You take it here, or in your room?" asked the man.

"Oh, here, it doesn't matter," exclaimed Hilary.

This telephone was in an alcove of the wide hall, and when she had lifted the receiver, Hilary knew why the manservant had suggested that she take the call in her own room. From the wide glass doors of the big reception room came the murmur of voices, a sharp explosion of laughter, but she put one hand to her ear to shut out the interruptions.

"Yes?" she asked, trying to keep the excitement from her voice.

"Is that you, Hilary?"

"Yes, I knew it would be you," she breathed.

"There you are then, in England at last," Mark Duncaster said, and that deep voice, the intangible quality already of familiarity and affection pleased and satisfied her.

She settled into the little backless chair fitted into the alcove with a sense of homecoming which she had not had with her brother.

All the simple words of inquiry about her journey, about her safe arrival, her well-being were charged with warmth and love. Every little detail could be shared with him.

"But what about you?" she asked. "Where are you speaking from?"

"The usual place, St. Antholin's," he laughed. "Very full diary, I'm afraid, otherwise I'd want to see you."

"But I shall be there on Monday," she told him. "I'm looking forward to it."

"To your work? Never admit that, Hilary, my dear. Let down the whole hard-worked medical profession. As a matter of fact, I've got a case that interests me very much at the moment—another heart, child this time—and I'm standing by."

"You've never talked much about your own line," Hilary

was glad to reproach him, for that fact gave her a sense of freedom and sharing.

"It takes all one's time to keep up with it nowadays," he said soberly.

"Do I take that as a hint that you won't have much time for friends?" Hilary asked with mischief.

She heard him laugh, and she felt that she could have put out a hand and touched him.

"Tell me, your brother's name is John, isn't it?"

"What in the world? Why are you asking that?" demanded Hilary in surprise. "Yes, of course, I told you about John. I'm staying with him, at Uncle's flat. Why do you ask such a silly question?"

He was laughing now.

"Wait and see. I'll explain later. Looking forward to seeing you."

Hilary felt radiant, enfolded, glowing, and when at last she put the receiver down and returned to the crowded room, she felt as if she had been drinking the headiest wine of all.

The girl who had smiled at Hilary came across the room to her.

She was a slim creature, almost too thin, but elegantly boned, and her long pale hair hung down on each side of a face with high cheekbones, penciled eyebrows, and eyes of a clear and decided gray. Her face was pale, but not unhealthy, and her curved nose and strong chin contradicted the first impression of insipidity.

"You're John's sister. Welcome to England," the girl said in a deep, pleasant voice, again a contradiction to her delicate appearance.

Trust John to have a new girl in London, his sister thought almost disdainfully. Why not? Violet had been a mere episode in his life in Rhodesia, and again Hilary sent a silent apology to the memory of her dead friend.

The conversation was swift and laughing around them. There were jokes about the other members of the club, there was talk about business and theatres, while the dark man-servant served drinks as a matter of course, and Maddalena assisted by bringing trays of savories.

"I do so want to know more about John's home, and I was

so pleased when I heard that you were coming. It was all arranged very quickly wasn't it? I know how delighted John was."

"I wasn't sure that I'd get this chance at St. Antholin's," explained Hilary.

John moved over to them to stand behind the girl. "Can I get you one of your revolting soft drinks, Elspeth?" he asked.

"Now run away," she said softly, "I want to talk to your sister." She turned to Hilary again as John went with reluctance.

"You are alike," said Elspeth, studying the other girl. "I'd know those eyes anywhere, I think."

She followed John's progress through the crowded room as if to check the looks of brother and sister.

"He's much better looking than I am," said Hilary, gaily.

John had not mentioned this obvious latest entanglement. No, she must not call it that. Elspeth Medwin had an air of quality about her, of decision, of self-control which was unusual.

"Do tell me about the farm and Robin. I've always wanted to see Rhodesia. Maybe I will one day."

Her interest was infectious. Hilary began to talk of her home, of her mother's garden, of Robin's plans, of the sports club in the township.

"I was always so glad to get back after my term in hospital," she said. "And then the 'boys', our servants you know, used to come and consult me as if I could solve every medical problem."

This girl was interested in John, that was plain. Who was she? What did she do? There was an air of unostentatious wealth about her simple, beautifully-cut dress. Her hands might be bare of rings, but she wore a tiny bracelet watch set with diamonds which was obviously a very expensive toy.

"I hope you'll come down and see us," the girl said. "My grandfather has a place in the country. John could bring you down tomorrow."

"I . . . I don't know." Hilary was troubled, thinking of the chance that Mark might telephone.

Merriment came to Elspeth's face. She nodded at someone across the room, and as she turned, a man's arm knocking out cigarette ash jolted her hand holding the long glass of fruit juice, and the liquid spilled on Hilary's dress.

"I'm so sorry," said Elspeth, dabbing at it quickly.

"It's nothing," but Hilary looked ruefully at the pale green silky material.

"Water will take it out. Let me come with you," Elspeth was at once in command.

Maddalena the maid followed with a soft cloth, and a moment later the two girls were in Hilary's room, dealing with the large stain.

"You wouldn't think a little drop like that could make so much mess, would you?" asked Elspeth.

She was kneeling on the floor, the cloth in her hand, and she looked to Hilary much more vulnerable, much more appealing than she had done in the reception room.

"It's all right now," declared Hilary. "The skirt's only damp, and it will dry in a few minutes."

Elspeth was still kneeling, as if lost in thought.

"I'd like to be friends with you," she said suddenly.

"Well, why not?" Hilary was embarrassed.

"I'm so strongly protected by Grandfather and aunts," she said. "I envy your freedom."

Elspeth stood up, wrung the damp cloth out in a business-like way over the oval pink basin in Hilary's room, and proceeded to wash her hands thoughtfully. In the gilt-framed mirror over the basin Hilary could see the girl's sad expression.

She's interested in John and she won't commit herself, Hilary thought, and marvelled at the girl's control.

This was like Mark Duncaster's reaction, this effort at carefulness.

Then Elspeth changed. She laughed almost gaily.

"You mustn't take me too seriously," she said. "I've seen two disastrous marriages. I lived with one, my mother's, until she died; then my sister broke off her engagement to a very nice man, and married . . . oh, a weak creature, no good to her at all. I don't intend to make a mistake myself."

Hilary watched her thoughtfully.

"I see," she said slowly.

What did John think of the situation, she wondered. And if this Elspeth girl were really interested in him, what would she say if she knew the story of Belinda?

Hilary felt nervous of the situation. Then she tried to reassure herself. No doubt John had been at his charming best and Elspeth was more intrigued than definitely caught.

If she really cared, as Hilary knew she herself cared for Mark Duncaster, Elspeth would not be talking like this.

"I hope you're not asking me for advice," Hilary tried to speak lightly. "In the West family we never give advice on Saturdays and Sundays."

"I see. You must have a carefree weekend?" Elspeth responded to the lightness gratefully.

They were laughing together when they entered the hall, where already some of the guests were departing. John was host at the door, saying good-bye. His face cleared as he looked at the laughing girls.

"What have you two been up to?" he asked.

"Elspeth has been helping me to get the stain out of this frock," Hilary explained.

"A little stain can spread a great way. You'd be surprised." Elspeth shook her head at him. For a second his guilty eyes met those of Hilary. Strange how a light remark should point the story she had told him that afternoon.

"You must come down to our place tomorrow," said Elspeth, turning to John.

"I will," he said.

"That's a promise?" she asked. "Can you keep it?"

Hilary could have told her that insistence was not the way to hold John. There were certain pressures to which he did not respond. They were pulling against each other, and Elspeth seemed the last girl in the world to understand the truth about Violet.

There were to be guests to dinner, then there was to be a theatre party.

"I haven't retired into a television fan, like you Jock," Roger Fennell said proudly to the elder man.

"Elspeth said she'd drive me home," he admitted.

"Stay on, Elspeth," begged John.

But she shook her head. "I promised Gran," she said simply. "See you tomorrow."

During dinner, simple but beautifully cooked, Hilary found herself beside Brandon, the little man with the mustache.

"Lucky to have service, Fennell," he said. "Only the very privileged can command it, except of course in Rhodesia, eh, Miss Hilary?"

"My sister is a doctor," John pointed out.

"I suppose I always took service for granted," Hilary said. "Josiah and Sombrero were just people, friendly creatures who had their funny ways, just as we have our funny ways too."

The conversation was turned round to the timber company affairs as if their Uncle Roger were not interested in Rhodesia.

Hilary listened with care, but all she gathered was that Roger Fennell's drive for expansion was not altogether approved by his fellow directors. A mild comment from John was snapped down as if he were of no importance. Little Brandon raised his eyebrows.

"Come now, John's not such a nincompoop as you make out."

"One of these days he could land himself, and other people, into a hole he couldn't get out of," said Roger Fennell angrily. "I've given him a good deal of help and advice."

"What's the good of advice to a young man?" laughed Brandon. "Let him make his mistakes."

"Not in my company, and not if I can help it," said Roger Fennell with coldness. "Let me fill up your glass for you, Hilary."

She wanted to cry defiance at him for his treatment of her brother. She could only say "No, thanks," in as cool a tone as she could contrive.

His wrinkled face creased in an unexpected smile.

"Female in defence, is that it?" he asked. "Hilary, if you really knew your brother—"

"I should fight for him just the same," Hilary answered with gaiety.

"Maybe you and I are on the same side after all," he said,

looking at her carefully as if he had never noticed her before.

"I'd like John to make the best of his life."

"I am here," John said, with unusual mildness, even mockery in his tone.

The others laughed.

"That's what I want too," Hilary said quickly in an undertone to her uncle.

"Does the best include my taking Hilary down to see Elspeth tomorrow?" John enquired, with mock humility. "What are your plans?"

Hilary realized that John was not free to make even a simple engagement without consulting his uncle.

"Of course, you're included too," he added quickly.

"And listen to old Medwin talking of his prize cattle and his greenhouses and the sailing he did when a boy?" said Roger Fennell. "I shall take it quietly here during the morning. But you two go. Now we must hurry, or we'll miss the first act."

Hilary went to fetch her light coat. She was not sure that she could keep up with her uncle's standard of living. The white coat with its green lining to match her silk frock might be pretty, but not oustanding enough for this setting.

As she waited in the hall, while some of the party went down in the lift, Roger Fennell joined her.

"Well, what do you think of Elspeth?" he asked her.

"I like her," Hilary said in surprise.

"John hadn't told you about her?"

"No, I'd never heard of her before."

He chuckled.

"Sly dog," he said, with one of his puzzling changes of mood. "I might tell you it was a bit of a surprise to me. She's an odd girl. You know who she is, the granddaughter of old Medwin. Old Scottish name, and would have had nothing but an old Scottish income, but her mother—divorced, you know—married some biscuit manufacturer in the States. Both were killed in an air crash, and so the money has come to Elspeth. John couldn't do better for himself. I rather think he wanted you to meet her before their engagement was announced."

VI

THERE HAD been no chance of being alone with John that night, or even the next morning, for it seemed that he must pick up some more friends, young and lively couples who chatted of mutual acquaintances.

They drove down wide traffic-filled roads, cut off on the other side of low hills called "Downs", Hilary could not think why, and went along quieter roads between fields rich in green and gold.

So settled, so cultivated, somehow, in spite of traffic, of new buildings, still so restful. And this was Mark Duncaster's country. She would have loved it for itself, even without him.

They turned in at big gates and drove past farm buildings of mellow red brick.

Hilary had been sitting beside John while two youths behind argued violently with the little man with the big mustache about Victorian architecture. Now, as they talked about Medwin and his projects, she realized that Meddlestead meant not only a country house, but an estate, a trust, a business which covered forestry, cattle-breeding, the management of a couple of villages.

"The new feudal system, and a damned sight harder to work," said Brandon. "For a Scotsman who came south with nothing but his brains old Medwin's done very well."

"Pity his only daughter's marriage went wrong. And then Kitty Medwin bolted. Now he clamps down on Elspeth. Play for safety. Speculate with money, but never with love. She may be tarred with the same brush."

"Now what do you mean by that?" laughed John.

Hilary wondered if the others suspected the engagement and were teasing John.

She could see there might be truth in the criticism. Elspeth was serious where John was lighthearted, and yet the attraction of opposites had drawn them together.

Elspeth met them in the drive, as if she had been waiting

for them. She wore jodhpurs, as if she had just been riding and she looked first at John expectantly. He flung himself out of the car, not waiting to help his sister out, and went to Elspeth. Putting his arm round her, he said, "How's my honey girl?"

For an instant she rested her head against his shoulder, and over her fair head Hilary saw John's triumphant smile. No doubt in his mind now that in the end he would win this girl.

If he suspected that his uncle had spoken to Hilary of the engagement, if he had noticed her silence, her withdrawal, this glance might be one of triumph.

"We've a few friends to lunch. Come in and see Gran," said Elspeth, leading the way along the terrace to a small room with shelves loaded with files and tape recordings, a huge desk and an array of telephones.

"This is Gran's lair," she said gaily.

Her grandfather was sitting at the desk, another man in tweeds had his back to the door. "And here is an old friend who simply invited himself."

She looked mischievously at Hilary.

"Mark Duncaster, just returned from the wilds of . . . where was it?"

"As if you didn't know it was Rhodesia," he returned. "How do you do, Dr. Hilary."

VII

HILARY GASPED with surprise. Color rose to her cheeks, she had to keep back the words of excitement and pleasure.

"How . . . how did you get here?" she asked foolishly.

"He has a very nice sports car," said Elspeth with a touch of mischief that improved her appearance. "I expect St. Antholin's is falling down without him."

"Isn't a hard-worked consultant allowed some country air?" asked Mark, still holding Hilary's hand under cover of a highbacked chair.

"Hard-worked! Country air!" boomed old Jock Medwin. "Look at the sunburn on him! Just back from somewhere or other. Come and have some sherry, all of you."

Hilary came back to reality to find John glancing at her with curiosity. It was Elspeth who introduced Mark to him.

"He's neglected us for ages, then he rings up and enquires if . . . if the John West I know is from Rhodesia and whether he has a sister called Hilary. Can't think why! Now come along."

In laughter and teasing they were swept back to the terrace where Mr. Medwin poured sherry into the most beautifully cut glasses Hilary had ever seen.

Away from the wind, sheltered by a trellis covered with late roses, chairs had been set out in the mild sunshine.

"Why didn't you tell me? How did you come? You might have told me yesterday on the telephone," Hilary reproached Mark, still dazzled by the fact of his being here with her.

"It was all my own doing," said Mark with delight and pride. "I met old Jock Medwin at my club and he told me that John's sister was expected from Rhodesia—two and two together, five and a half. Isn't it clever of me?"

"Imagine you two knowing each other!" Elspeth repeated, smiling. "But I took Mark's hint at once, of course and invited him to lunch."

"I met Dr. Hilary at Victoria Falls," said Mark. "In fact I saved her from falling in, and wouldn't that have been a loss to the medical profession!"

He was talking gaily, watching Hilary as if he could not take his eyes from her. She was still confused, excited at the meeting, puzzled at the link between Mark Duncaster and Elspeth.

She heard Mark's deep voice beside her. "Confound all these people," he was saying. "Ask to see old Medwin's greenhouses."

"You are much more artful than I imagined," Hilary whispered back.

Half an hour before lunch would be ready, Elspeth warned them frankly.

"I do think Dr. Hilary ought to see your greenhouses," Mark said to his host.

"Aye. Of course, my boy. I'll be glad to show the lassie round," said Mr. Medwin with appreciation.

And show them round he did, quoting names in Latin, telling long histories of his achievements and failures, lost in his own enjoyment.

It was not until they reached the carnation house that he said he must go back. Would Mark mind showing Dr. Hilary the rest?

"Do my best," he answered agreeably.

When they were alone, he put his arms round her. "Thought he'd never go. Hilary, have you missed me? It's been too long, weeks, months, years."

He was kissing her, and Hilary thought she would remember the perfume of the cherished beauties of the carnations around them all her life.

"It's not really so long," she pointed out. "But how did you come to be here? Mr. Medwin talked as if you were a great friend of the family."

Mark's face was grave now.

"I thought you might as well know now as later. I told you about the girl who treated me . . . well, unfairly. I suppose she couldn't help herself, poor Kitty Medwin. We were going to be married, and then she bolted. At first, I couldn't stand seeing them again, but old Medwin was kindness itself. Elspeth was hurt too. It's a family that sticks to old fashioned principles, and they were oddly hurt for me too. Ashamed of Kitty in a way. But it was better so. I wanted you to know, to have no secrets from you, as you have none from me."

"How do you know that?" asked Hilary, and she nestled into the curve of his arm.

"Your innocent eyes, my dear."

She thought of Belinda, of John's engagement to Elspeth, who was Mark's friend, of the difficulties ahead of her. She could hardly tell Mark now in these few moments before lunch.

"I dashed down here just for lunch and to meet you," he said, "I'll get back immediately afterwards. You're still of the same mind, Hilary?"

She nodded and was kissed for her answer.

Then they had to return to eat portions of Mr. Medwin's famous ducks, to taste his special peaches. Hilary could understand that Roger Fennell would be bored by this country pride, yet she found something endearing in it.

After coffee Mark Duncaster said good-bye and drove away in his sports car.

Hilary wandered in from the terrace with a sense of anti-climax.

John and Elspeth were sitting together on the wide couch in the smaller lounge, but the girl had stiffened her back, her head was turned away from the young man, and on John's face there was that slight touch of sulkiness which his sister remembered from the old days.

She was conscious that her own mood of radiant happiness was far away from theirs. Was it chance that distributed these favors of love and understanding? And she came back to the problem of John with more bewilderment than ever.

"Well, if you take it like that," he was saying in a low, angry voice to Elspeth. "Nothing more to be said."

He drew himself up out of his seat, as if to make room for her, and his sister glanced at him acutely.

"You look like the cat that's swallowed half a dozen canaries at least, Hil."

"What's the matter, John? I'm not intruding?" she asked.

"My goodness, no."

Elspeth's color was heightened as if they had been arguing.

"John knows what I think. I . . . I don't feel decided enough. He's just had another spasm of pressing me to name a day for our wedding, but why should I be hurried? I can't—not yet. Anyone would think he was frightened of something going wrong."

Hilary could not help a start of misgiving.

It would be like John to rush the girl he wanted to marry, especially after the news Hilary had given him. Probably Elspeth Medwin was the only girl he had met who could stand out against him.

Hilary could feel almost sorry for his dilemma.

He stood with his hands in his pockets beside the flower-filled fireplace.

"Frightened?" he jeered at Elspeth. "What do you take me for? Sometimes I think you don't care at all."

"I . . . I think I'll go." Hilary was trying to be tactful.

"You needn't. I will," said John.

He flung away from them, but his words came over his shoulder.

"Elspeth has got a few stiff-necked antiquated notions, just the same as you have, Hilary. You can have a heart-to-heart chat, if that's what you want."

He went into the hall. There was no door to bang, or Hilary thought he would have done it.

"What's that all in aid of?" she asked more gaily than she felt.

Elspeth sighed.

"He will not see my point of view. Gran thinks the same as I do. John should have some security of position before we marry, and it's up to him to arrange that with his uncle."

"But Uncle Roger likes you; he approves," said Hilary.

"He approves of my having money, but I don't want to have to keep a husband," flashed Elspeth. "That would ask for trouble between the two of us."

"Yes, I see," said Hilary.

"Then, sometimes, I'm not sure. I must be sure myself."

There were tears in her eyes. If John had seen her like this, Hilary thought he would have understood the depth of her emotion, but it warred with her convictions, the advice of her grandfather and her experiences with her mother and sister.

Elspeth wiped her eyes.

"What a fool you must think me. And what a hostess! It's up to me to entertain you. John's gone off in a huff, Mr. Brandon is with Gran, the others went on to another engagement. Oh, let's stop thinking about all this and go out. Would you like to come for a ride? I can lend you some togs."

"Yes, indeed."

Hilary's face had lighted with pleasure.

She followed Elspeth's lead in not discussing John's behavior until they returned in the afternoon. They had been along grassy rides, they had cantered their horses over the turf which had a greenness and a springiness new to Hilary. It

was only as they walked their mounts back toward the park that Elspeth said thoughtfully:

"You see, I don't seem to be very useful. Oh, there's Gran, and I suppose I'm really his secretary and chauffeuse. I like all that, but that's wished on me. In one way, I envy you, Hilary. Do you know, at one time, I thought I'd like to be a doctor."

"It takes more than that," she answered quietly. "At the beginning, I thought I couldn't stick it, and some of the girls fainted. There's a grim side to it, too, you know."

"I suppose so. But I feel a bit impatient with myself. I want to be of use. There's that convalescent home for the children along the coast from us, and I go there, and give them things. I do what I can, but—"

Hilary thought, she wants to give all of herself, as any woman wants, and she is unhappy because she doesn't quite trust John. She has that instinct about him. And who am I to say anything about it?

She may be just the one that John wants, that he needs to bring him to his senses, but wouldn't she suffer in the process of finding out what he's really like? What can I do? To hold back his secret may be unfair to her; it is unfair, but how can I let him down?

It isn't for me to tell her, thought Hilary sadly.

And I couldn't tell her now, just after they've had this row.

"Such lots of things we must do together," Elspeth said, with enthusiasm. "Explore, show you the sights."

"I'm a working girl, remember," laughed Hilary. "But there's such heaps I want to see and do in London—in England."

They were making plans when they returned to the house, to find other visitors had arrived, girl friends of Elspeth's with their escorts.

When John returned, he admitted that he had driven long and furiously along the coast road, and had worked off his bad temper. What a way to do it, observed Hilary, and he looked at her apprehensively.

Perhaps it would do him no harm if he thought that she had talked to Elspeth about him. There was no chance

for private talk, for when he drove home he must take the other girls. There were complicated arrangements about who had to be dropped where, and when at last Hilary and John reached the Fennell home, their uncle had men visitors who had to be entertained.

Thank Heaven for St. Antholin's, thought Hilary, as she went to bed, half disappointed at her first day in London. But there was the picture of the green countryside, the soft air and the freedom of riding with Elspeth, most of all the touch of Mark Duncaster's lips, to remember. The next day she would be in her own world.

In the new world of St. Antholin's, with her luggage whisked into her room in the doctors' quarters almost before she could realize it, Hilary found herself too busy to think of any other problems than those of her patients. There was so much to learn: the ramifications of the old building, the layout of the new, the names and idiosyncrasies of the staff, the adaptability to the methods of a hospital different from the one where she had trained.

The language was the same, but there were so many different accents. The formality of the caps and brooches, the variations in belts, the stiff manner with hands behind the back—a stiffness which chilled her at first. So many names, so much to remember, yet in the end, it came down as her old Sister Tutor had said in her thick voice, "The patient is a person, whoever it is, whatever color or language or class. That is all. And however many there are, it is one at a time, and you speak to one."

That curiosity which had driven her on through her studies, that revulsion from the thought of staying on the farm which had been inexplicable to her mother, that longing to give all she had, was with her, and enriched by the love she had for Mark Duncaster.

Her ward, the Lady Diana ward for children, was in the new block.

"Too full, of course," said Dr. Wedgewood, her colleague, tapping her teeth with her pencil in a most unhygienic manner.

There was Patience, whose temper belied her name, who

had been most thoroughly spoilt at home, who squirmed and complained and wept and screamed to tear the bandages from her body.

"It's meself would be putting something in her milk one of these nights," Nurse O'Brien dared to mutter to second year Nurse Jones.

"You shouldn't talk like that about a suffering che-ild," said that brisk young woman.

"If she'd had a touch of the strap she'd never have been climbing and pulling down those bricks on top of her, the poor darlint," said the contradictory O'Brien. "And here's the new doctor again. Fuss-pot. But then she's new."

Nurse Jones looked at the new woman doctor in her white coat. To her there would never be another doctor like her beloved Dr. Margaret, who had left St. Antholin's last year, and who had sent her a piece of wedding cake in the dearest little silver box. Too bad she hadn't been well enough to go to the wedding; she had wept quarts about it, but with mumps, the most devoted of friends could not go to a little church in Cornwall. But she had had a postcard of blue sea and mountains, sent on a honeymoon, if you please, and an invitation to visit when the new home was ready and finished.

This Dr. Hilary West was different; she was abrupt. Maybe she was a bit nervous, especially if she had the sarcastic eye of Sister Cunningham on her. Sometimes she was too slow for the nurses, taking an unconscionable time over each case, when any nurse worth her salt was planning the fly-round with pot and screen, with trolley and covered plates from the kitchen, with the entering of charts and the lists for dispensary and linen room.

But after a while the verdict of the nurses' gossip began to change.

"That frightful Patience actually quieted down for about five minutes after that Dr. Hilary had been with her," said Nurse O'Brien. "Sure and she's got lovely blue eyes in her head. Some of the kids played up just to get her to smile at them. She'd make a good mother."

"Of all the sickening sentiment you talk," drawled their friend, Cora Gallagher. "You'd think you'd have enough to

do without going in for detective work on the staff. My feet are killing me. When are they going to bring in someone to do the donkey work in nursing, I want to know."

"Remember Miss Nightingale," said O'Brien in sepulchral tones, and they went into girlish giggles just as Dr. Hilary West came into the ward.

"Something standoffish about her. Where is she from?"

"It's just that she seems dreamy, or thinking about something else. And you know that baby we had, with the burnt arms, she called her Belinda, and then laughed at herself."

"We haven't got a Belinda in the ward. I learned all their names, so as to keep up the 'home-like atmosphere'," said Nurse Jones, in a mock-mincing tone.

"I'd give 'em 'home-like' " muttered O'Brien, who came from a large family in the West of Ireland, and had the softest heart of the group, and loved to hand round the go-to-sleep sweeties.

Such a mixture of children, the frightened, the curious, the trustful, the unbearable. The confiding eyes of the child with the burnt arms had reminded her so much of the child Belinda.

She had had a letter from Mrs. Bott. All was well. Her sister, the widowed Mrs. Brown, had arrived from England. Mrs. Bott had had a slight fall herself, on the verandah steps, but nothing to worry about. Belinda was pleased with the picture book, to know that it had flown there, had looked for its wings. Her sister Mrs. Brown was a great help.

In this immense community which was St. Antholin's there was little chance of running into Mark Duncaster. She heard Dr. Appleby mention his name when she was having lunch in the "Cabin".

"Duncaster? Get him of course if it's a heart case. That's just up his street."

She had intended to telephone John. She had thanked her uncle for his hospitality, and explained that her work entailed residence at St. Antholin's. She had excused herself from seeing Elspeth, better to leave her to make up the quarrel with John.

This evening she thought she would telephone him, but her telephone rang and Mark's voice greeted her.

"Can I tempt you out for an hour?" he asked.

"Where do you want me to meet you?" she asked cautiously.

He laughed.

"I can see no chances to be taken with rackety Londoners. Is that it? I'll have the car in the Alley, you know that? Where all the Staff cars are parked."

"Not there," said Hilary in horror. "Further away, outside, in another street."

He laughed, but gave her instructions obediently.

When she met him, fifteen minutes later, she had slipped on the new short beaver coat which Elspeth had tempted her into buying.

He gave an appreciative whistle.

"My word, Dr. Hilary. And why couldn't I call for you as I suggested?"

"I don't want anyone in the hospital to know about us," she said firmly. "I want to settle in."

"Independent, secretive creature. You don't want anyone to know that we're 'walking out'? is that it?" Mark Duncaster asked her with a mischievous gleam in his eye. "Didn't you know that it was an old English custom at St. Antholin's?"

"No, I don't, and it isn't, and there's one person who would not approve," said Hilary firmly.

"I can guess who that is, our old standby, Sister Cunningham. Old-fashioned as Scots granite."

"Do you think it's old-fashioned of me to keep my private affairs to myself?" Hilary said in pretended anger. "I've been at St. Antholin's just long enough to know how everything is talked about. And you're . . . you're rather important, and I'm so new."

He laughed as he put his arm round her.

She gave him a quick glance which surprised him.

"Only teasing," he told her. "You're as clear and open as daylight. And I know you'd get plenty of remarks at the hospital."

"You'd disturb me," she said, and had to be kissed again for the admission.

Life was whirling along, Hilary thought.

Mark Duncaster wanted to show her his own view of

London, Elspeth swept down on her at the week end, now John demanded that on one of her free evenings, she must meet him.

"Not at the flat with Uncle," she begged. "You know he doesn't approve of me, and it's such a waste of time to be with him."

"Very well," said John sulkily. "But he won't like it. Asks why you don't drop in. Meet me at the theatre club I told you about."

She waited in the mock Victorian atmosphere of old playbills, crimson plush seats against the wall, the imitation gas-globes which held electric light bulbs.

John was late, and when he came, he looked almost sulky.

"We could go somewhere better than this," he said, as if she had chosen the place.

"I don't mind, it's all right here," said Hilary.

He shrugged his shoulders, and gave an order to the waiter.

"We might as well have drinks here before we go in," he said. "Well, how's it going at the old hospital? Uncle was annoyed that you wouldn't stay at the flat."

"How ridiculous," Hilary was annoyed. "I want to be on my own. I shall have times of being on call."

"And you want to be near your doctor friend. Odd that he should turn out to have been engaged to Elspeth's sister."

John's voice sounded almost sneering.

"He's in a different department, and I am not likely to run across him in the course of my work," Hilary answered steadily.

She must not antagonize John. They must be able to discuss this problem of Belinda and of Elspeth without bitterness or anger. Yet she could not help that feeling of resentment that he could treat the matter with so little concern.

It was not until Hilary was finishing her ice cream and fruit that John demanded "Well, when are you going to tell Elspeth the pretty story? Surprised you haven't done it before."

She stared at him, and then flushed at the implication of his words.

"John! Did you think I would do that?" she asked hotly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You taking that holy attitude about what happened, I didn't know. I could deny it, you know."

Had John always been like this, with the insistence on his own interest hidden by his boyish charm?

"Let's get this clear," she managed to say at last. "This is your affair. Belinda is your responsibility and mine. I'm her guardian, appointed by her mother's will. As it happens, she doesn't need money, at present. But aren't you interested at all? Don't you want to know more about her? As she grows, there will be school problems, she ought to have a better home later on. . . . John, you can't just let the whole thing slide."

Yet that was what John had done with the child's mother. He had not broken fiercely and with an angry quarrel; he had simply let the affair slide. Much worse, Hilary thought with anger.

"Well, what do you want me to do?" he said. "It's like this, old girl, I am keen on Elspeth. At first, I don't mind telling you, it was the background, there's solid money there. It's just that there's something so steady about her. I don't think I'd ever get tired of Elspeth."

"She might get tired of you?" asked Hilary delicately.

John was surprised.

"I don't think so. She cares for me very much in that cool way of hers," said John with masculine complacency.

"She's been hurt," said Hilary slowly. "She told me about her mother running away, and it's very unusual for a girl to side with the father in a case like that. Then he died soon afterwards, and she's been with the grandfather. She's distrustful of life, she doesn't want to land in the same hole as her father. And then that business with her sister—"

"I wonder she didn't take on the sister's fiancé, that doctor chap," John said carelessly. "They seem to be on very good terms, and she might have been much more his cup of tea than the other one, Kitty Medwin. I've never seen her."

Hilary was annoyed. Could it be possible that Elspeth had a secret admiration for Mark Duncaster, although he had

never mentioned her? The fact of her sister's treatment of him might have made a bond between them. What nonsense was she thinking?

Mark Duncaster had been going to be a brother-in-law; it was natural that they should have a regard for each other.

"I just wish things could be cleared up with your uncle, and with Elspeth," repeated Hilary. "Can't you have a talk with him about it?"

"He likes people to be under his thumb," John said bitterly, rattling his coffee spoon against the cup in the old familiar fashion when he was annoyed. "And shall I tell you what he'll say? 'You get married to Elspeth, settled down, and we'll see about it.' I'm fond of Elspeth, but sometimes I think she's a stiff-necked little prig, and I wouldn't stand an earthly with her if you once told her this yarn about Violet and the child."

"Why should I tell her about it?" asked Hilary quietly. "It's for you to tell her."

"Don't be silly, Hil, my dar. I'll never tell her such a thing."

"You'd marry her and leave her in ignorance," began Hilary.

"Why not? What is the harm done? Lots of chaps must have been in the same boat. Just luck, that's all. The kid's miles away, Elspeth is not likely to know, and it would only make her unhappy. It would ruin all my chances if the story came out, you must see that. Don't look so distressed, Hil, old girl. Surely it's the best thing for us all to do, just keep quiet about it."

"I don't like it," said Hilary after a pause. "It's so unfair. And if Elspeth found out after you were married, she wouldn't feel very happy. Far better to ask her, to consult her, throw yourself on her mercy—I'm sure that would be best. Elspeth would be much more hurt if you'd kept the secret from her."

"Darned if I'll risk it," said John with vigor. "Like cutting my throat. With both of them, you should see that."

What could she do with his loved brother whose point of view was so different from her own? It was unthinkable that she should go to Elspeth and tell her the story; there was no one else to consult. She would hate to reveal the weakness

of John's character to Mark and she knew that there was an antipathy between them. And Mark had been in the position of becoming a brother-in-law to Elspeth.

"You make me very unhappy, John. Can't you see that it's all wrong? You'd feel much happier if you cleared up the situation by telling the truth."

"I shouldn't be clearing it up, I should be messing it up," he said with determination.

"I wish I knew the right thing to do," she said in bewilderment.

"If you don't know now then wait a while until you do," John said, and he was smiling as if the decision were already made.

He poured out more coffee for her, and Hilary drank it obediently. She had failed in persuading John to take on his responsibility; she felt disturbed and unhappy. He was cheerfulness itself now, making her laugh at his stories of the staff at his uncle's office.

He drove her back to the hospital.

She went to the letter board automatically. There was an air letter. Mrs. Bott had been in the habit of writing fairly regularly, but this was not Mrs. Bott's handwriting. She read:

Dear Dr. West,

I am writing you because my sister and I have talked this over several times. The fact is she has been ill after that fall, and you know she has always been homesick for England, after all these years. Now she has had an offer for the property she has by the sea, quite a good offer from a luxury hotel, so she wants to come home with me at once. I was very worried about the change in her since she fell down those stairs a few weeks ago, and the doctor agrees with me that she will be better in England. I had arranged to fly home myself, but we may have to wait for the other seats, for of course my sister is bringing Belinda with her. The doctor has looked at her too. He says she must have medical treatment too, so you can tell I am worried out of my life about the two of them. I don't really know whether I

can cope with Belinda in England, but we will see when we get there. Will you write to my home address please, I will let you know the time and date of our arrival.

Yours truly,
Lilian Brown.

This was a complication for which Hilary had not bargained. It was natural that Mrs. Bott should want to return to England, especially as she could travel with her sister, and Belinda must come with them. But the veiled suggestion about "whether I can cope" and "medical treatment too" was intensely worrying.

What could she do about Belinda?

VIII

Hilary was disturbed not only by the contents of the letter but by a puzzling note in it. No doubt the writer, Mrs. Brown, the unknown sister of Mrs. Bott, was worried about her, and perhaps vaguely resentful of the presence of Belinda. Poor little Belinda, unknown to her father, robbed of her mother by cruel accident, and at the mercy of a woman who was after all, a stranger.

Hilary thought of the children in the ward she served, of the difficulty of explaining suffering to them, of the hurt caused by the temporary absence of a parent, of the joy at the arrival of a mother. The change in expression on the sullen face of difficult Alfred on the arrival of that careless woman, his mother, who had left an electric fire unguarded was sharp in her memory. Each child needed to be wanted.

What was to happen to Belinda, especially with this hint of illness?

It seemed to Hilary that during the last few months, since her meeting with Mark Duncaster and the new joy that had come into her life, since her discovery of Belinda, life had a deeper meaning. She had awakened to other values. She would not have blamed John so much if it had not been for

that realization. She had come up against sudden death, sudden love, and the need of a small child.

I want to see her again, she thought. Now where can she go?

Mrs. Brown had given an address in a suburb of South London. She would be able to see Belinda, to take her out, to enjoy her company. Perhaps the introduction of this small scrap of humanity to John might help to change his attitude.

She shook her head thoughtfully.

John might see this happening only as another threat to his engagement to Elspeth. She would have to keep the presence of Belinda as a secret for the time being. The complications she could see ahead would be worse the more she looked at them.

She reread the letter, concerned now about the mention of medical treatment for Belinda. What could be the matter with the child? It sounded more than some childish ailment.

If I think any more about Belinda, I shall be running myself into a temperature, Hilary decided, and went on her way.

There was that case of mastoid, just recovering, a bandaged, blunt-nosed boy called, most unsuitably, Rollo. There were the polio children to be considered.

She had thought about asking Mark Duncaster about Belinda, but perhaps it would be better to wait until the child arrived. She wrote to Mr. Wellingdon about advancing the money for the air passage, about the child's passport, and also to Mrs. Bott that if she could let Hilary know date and time she would do her best to meet them.

> It's not the best time of year to come, so do wrap Belinda up warmly. She will feel the contrast of the climate at once. Mr. Wellingdon is sending money for her outfit, but if there is anything more, please let me know at once.

She could write with feeling about the climate, about the rain which misted the windows of her new little car, about the early darkness of the afternoon which set her longing for the clarity, the brightness of her own Rhodesian air.

"Extravagant girl," Mark Duncaster chided her about the car. "Or is it a present from the uncle or your brother?"

"Goodness, no," said Hilary. "It's not new, through one of Dr. Wedgwood's friends, and how can I find my way about London if I don't drive?"

"Optimist," he said. "And I'm only waiting to be asked to be chauffeur."

Hilary laughed.

"When your engagement book is full, when I'm afraid to telephone your consulting-room because of that terribly superior voice of your secretary—"

"Shared by the other men who share our top-notch address," he pointed out.

"And when you do come to St. Antholin's, you're so busy in the theatre on the top floor."

They were sitting in his car on the way to Hampstead, where he shared a bachelor flat with a silent, bookish friend, Barry.

"I'm not taking you to a theatre tonight," Mark said. "You've got a cold, the result of rushing round London, trying to see everything at once. You will have to put up with Barry's pipe smoke and his classical music."

"I haven't got a cold. I mustn't have a cold now," insisted Hilary.

As the car moved through the crowded streets, where the changing lights were reflected in the streaming roadway, Mark said, "You know, I'm beginning to see something in that brother of yours. Elspeth seems to have made an impression on him. Not nearly as bumptious as he used to be. I quite like him."

"He's not bumptious," defended Hilary. "I'm glad you like him better."

Now was not the time to tell him about John's secret.

They had reached the big block of flats on the heights of Hampstead, and Mark parked his car in the forecourt.

It was a small, compact flat on the third floor, a bachelor's den, Mark called it. There were always piles of newspapers, books, medical journals, opened letters and town envelopes on the long counter beside the telephone which ran under the one enormous window. An electric fire pretended to be a

cosy log fire with some success, and Mark pushed the leather-seated chair toward it.

"Only objection to Barry is that he will play his radiogram too loud," he said. "But no theatre for you while you're suffering from the English climate. Rest by the fire. I'll forage in the fridge. Neat phrase that, eh?"

Hilary sank back in the big chair. It was true that she had been rushing round in her spare time, trying to absorb this crowded exciting city, with its old gray buildings, its unexpected garden squares, its lighted shop windows displaying every conceivable attraction and temptation.

Mark came in from the minute kitchen.

"Sandwiches of the best roast beef, hot coffee, black as you like it, with a dash of cognac."

"I didn't think you could cope with housekeeping," Hilary said lazily.

She had pushed one big leather cushion on to the rug and sat there in front of the fire.

"Why don't you try me? In the spring, Hilary? What have we to wait for?"

He moved the sturdy standard lamp further back so that the light did not shine into her eyes.

"My contract at the hospital," she reminded him. "And . . . and there is something else. You said yourself it was too soon, that you had a sense of caution."

He sat down in the chair, and she leaned against his knee.

"Coffee's good," she said. "First time I've been warm all day. Everything went wrong, extra beds because casualty was full, and Sister Cunningham on the war path. I don't think she likes me."

"Sense of caution!" jeered Mark. "Haven't I driven you round London, toiled over the stones of the Tower of London for you on my free day."

"Not many free days," teased Hilary in her turn.

"I've driven you to look at the sea."

"Wild and dark and stormy, but it was lovely," she admitted.

"I've even gone to the opera with you and had coffee afterwards at the most hygienic coffee-stall you could find.

It's true that I refused to stay up and see the flower market at 4 A.M., but a man must draw the line somewhere."

From Barry's room next door came the familiar beginning of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony.

"This is nice," said Hilary, "Don't talk, listen."

"Like this?" he said.

"Mark, you'll catch my cold," she warned him.

"It would be worth it," he said lazily. "Why are you so obstinate? Sometimes I think you've something on your mind. Silly girl. Are you worried that someone will talk about our friendship at the hospital? And what does it matter if they do?"

"I like it to be my own affair," said Hilary with equal laziness.

They were silent while the music rippled around them from Barry's room.

"I like the back of your neck," said Hilary unexpectedly. "I saw just that at the hospital today. What was your op, this time, about 11:30? You didn't see me, I was scampering along the corridor."

She liked him to talk about his cases, she loved to listen to that deep soothing voice which meant so much to her.

He was talking about the newest, most delicate operation on the heart of a child, the problem of freezing the blood, the timing of each process.

"A few years ago, it couldn't have been done on a young child," he told her.

"But why am I wasting time by talking shop?" he asked her, bending to kiss her hair.

Later, he mixed another hot drink for her, ordered her off the floor.

"To bed early for you, once."

"I always went to bed early at home in Rhodesia," she said.

"And now?"

"I catch up on theatres and Dr. Wedgwood likes French films. At first they shocked me to the core, but she said it was good for me."

"Good old Wedgie, I must take her out sometime. Drink

all that up, Dr. Hilary. And tuck yourself up in that scarf, I don't want an invalid for a wife."

"You're taking too much for granted," she contradicted, but the glistening light in her eyes was reflected in his. "How can you bother to kiss a girl with a pink nose and watery eyes, all the fault of this atrocious damp weather."

"Well, you would follow me to England," he told her, waiting for the mock anger.

"Wasn't I foolish?" she asked him, her head held sideways.

"And you've never answered my proposal," he whispered.

"When my cold is better," she answered, laughingly.

But when she had recovered Mark Duncaster had been called away to a hospital in Switzerland for a special consultation.

When he rang her up to tell her the news, he said, "Wonderful fee, I may tell you. Might even encourage a man to think of getting married. Promise you'll come out with me as soon as I get back."

"Of course," said Hilary gladly.

He telephoned on the Friday of his return to say that he had booked two seats for a special musical play which she had wanted to see, for the next evening. Hilary was distressed.

"Some friends, well, acquaintances really, are arriving from Africa," she told him, with a slight awkwardness which she would not help. "I really feel that I must meet them. I offered to drive them to their home. If you would let me off our date for tonight."

"Can't I come too?" he asked her in that frivolous mood which she found so difficult to deal with, which was such a contradiction to his efficient, quiet manner at St. Antholin's.

"Oh, no," said Hilary instantly.

There was a slight pause. Then she said, "I could manage both, if I were lucky."

His tone brightened. "You will come?" he asked. "If you're sure it's convenient."

"Mark!" she exclaimed, "You sound . . . sound huffy."

She began to laugh, for the idea seemed so preposterous.

"Of course I'm not," he said. "I'll see you at the theatre, then. Remember the play starts at eight o'clock."

Hilary thought she would have plenty of time. She put

on a new dress, a slim affair in golden-brown, with the short beaver jacket which John had told her was more for elegance than for keeping out the cold. She would have plenty of time to meet the plane, to see Belinda and Mrs. Bott and the unknown sister, drive them home in her own little car, as she had offered, and then go on to the theatre to meet Mark.

But she had reckoned without the vagaries of weather, of the chances against an airline.

She sat in the lounge at the airport, at first reading a magazine, then taking coffee in the restaurant, then staring out at the tarmac where planes came and went, but not the one she expected. The calm, impersonal voice of the announcer had explained that there was a slight delay at Khartoum to the plane she awaited. There might be the difference of an hour in the plane's arrival. An hour might not be so bad, but the one hour lengthened to two.

The one person who should have been there with her, John, had shied away from the idea in horror. His only comment on learning that Mrs. Bott was coming to England with Belinda had been "For heaven's sake, keep me out of it!"

At last the news came that the plane from Salisbury, Entebbe, Benghazi and Malta, would be coming in. The great machine taxied to a standstill.

Hilary saw the stairway pushed into position, the passengers descending. She saw an air hostess helping Belinda in furry coat and leggings down the steps, Belinda apparently having refused to be carried. At that distance Hilary could smile at this evidence of character, even at that age. The woman with Mrs. Bott must be her sister.

Now Hilary must wait in the entrance hall until the formalities of passports and Customs examination of baggage were over.

At last she saw the little group approaching, and went forward.

Belinda took her attention from the doll and the pink basket that she was carrying and lifted her small face.

"There you are at last, Belinda," Hilary exclaimed and picked her up in her arms.

Belinda accepted her kiss, slung one arm around Hilary's neck, knocking her fur cap sideways, and said "Mummie".

"She would have it that she was going to meet her Mummie," said Mrs. Bott, flustered. "There was a little boy on the plane, said he was going to meet his Mummie. So she's just copied him. She's got it all wrong, but I didn't like to make too much fuss about it, to upset her."

Hilary laughed.

"It's no wonder, I suppose. I'm Auntie Hilary, don't you remember?"

"Auntie Hilary," repeated Belinda obligingly.

She pulled at Hilary's hand and babbled about the little boy and the airplane, the lemonade and the dolly who had upset it, the nice lady who had owned the airplane.

Hilary stemmed the tide of chatter with greetings to Mrs. Bott. The sister, Mrs. Brown, was like her, but thinner, more wary, with sharp eyes.

"I was so sorry to hear you'd been ill, Mrs. Bott," Hilary said. "And you have come to England at a bad time of the year. Now can I drive you back? It is rather late, and I'm not sure that—"

"Oh, yes, thank you," said Mrs. Bott eagerly. "We hadn't made any arrangements; we thought we'd take the bus and then by train, but if you could take us, we'd be very glad."

Hilary now regretted her friendly offer. First they had to arrange to have Mrs. Brown's baggage sent separately, because there was not room enough in Hilary's small car. Then there was an endless discussion as to which suitcase should be taken, and which two left to be sent on. The time was going on, she did not want to be late for the theatre, and she wondered how long the drive would take.

Traffic was heavy, there were one-way streets, Mrs. Brown gave wrong directions, and twice Hilary had to turn and retrace her way. It was late when they arrived at the southern suburb, and the two storied house which was Mrs. Brown's home.

It was a pleasant enough house, set in a trim garden, and with a slight hill behind where trees still retained a few brown leaves.

"Now you will come in and have some tea?" said Mrs.

Brown, bustling up the path and opening the door. "I hope my neighbor has lighted the fire."

"If you don't mind, I don't think I can stop," Hilary said. "I've another engagement. You'll want to be settled in, and Belinda is dropping with sleep now. I'll come down and see you as soon as I can. I want to hear about your plans. You say that Belinda should see a doctor as soon as possible. What is the matter with her?"

"Old Dr. Matt wasn't too pleased with her in Durban. He said there'd have to be a further examination. It's her heart, he says."

"Heart! Good gracious, I should never have thought that," said Hilary, in dismay. "If I'd known—"

"Well, what could you have done, miles away, over here?" asked Mrs. Brown, and there was a faint sneer on her thin face. "If you can't stay, well, of course, you can't, but it's Belinda's first day in a strange country, and I should have thought you would have wanted to be with her."

"It's all right. Dr. Hilary was very good to drive us home," interposed Mrs. Bott. "After all, you didn't know exactly the time when we'd get here."

Hilary made her good-byes in the mixed atmosphere of friendliness from Mrs. Bott and an odd suspicion from Mrs. Brown.

As she went out on to the red brick path she heard the high pitched voice of the sister saying, "Dust in my eyes! Why, you've only to look at Belinda's eyes to know."

Hilary drove fast from the suburb back into the center of the town. But now there was the parking problem. She had to go from one full car park to another, and having found one, she then had to walk to the theatre, not surprised that the first act of the play was over. Mark Duncaster was in the vestibule, but in a group of people.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, the traffic held me up," she said breathlessly. "I'll just leave my coat."

She knew Mark well enough to realize that he was annoyed at her lateness. In its way, that was a compliment.

"I had some company," he said lightly.

"Elspeth, I didn't know you were coming," Hilary said.

"John got the tickets some time ago," said the girl smiling.

"Pity you missed the whole of the first act," said Mark. "It's delightful."

The situation distressed Hilary. The little scene from which she had just come, the implication from Mrs. Bott's sister, not surprising in the circumstances, and so difficult, in fact impossible to contradict, the fact that she had hurried, and was now reproached, the resentment she felt against John, all made her feel out of temper.

"Well, if you think I've missed so much, perhaps I'd better not stay," she snapped.

Mark looked at her in astonishment, for once his sense of humor in abeyance.

"What's happened to you?" he asked. "You're not a bit like yourself."

"I'll take her along to the bar to get a drink," said John smoothly. "I can't let a good girl down. Come along."

Hilary turned her back on Mark and followed her brother to the tiny bar.

"Now you're not going to talk about it all now," he assured her. "Anyone can see you're upset, but for goodness' sake hold your horses. Do you want to let me down?"

Hilary emptied the glass he had brought her.

"You don't see what the situation has landed me in. I'm supposed to be her mother now!"

John began to laugh, then stopped.

"Good lord, no, Hilary."

"This Mrs. Brown's sister is a sharp-eyed, suspicious creature, and when Belinda greeted me as 'Mummie' "—

"Listen, just leave it for a little while," he begged her. "Carry it on just a little longer, Hil. Elspeth thinks I might get a job with her grandfather's estate. It might be better to have that up my sleeve to argue with dear Uncle Roger. You can't let me down now."

"You don't see where it lands me," she said quickly, as they made their way back to the vestibule. "It isn't only yourself that you've landed in a hole; I'm the one who is in the hole."

"Who's in a hole?" asked Elspeth lightly, turning from her conversation with Mark. She looked lovely this evening, in the palest lime green which suited her coloring, a mink

stole over her shoulders. Hilary felt rushed and untidy after her experiences.

"The first bell has rung, we'd better get back to our seats, John."

"Unless Hilary wants to change seats," said Mark. "And you sit with me, Elspeth."

Hilary flushed at the snub. How could he reproach her in this open manner?

She forgot his own experience of strain in a foreign hospital, and his journey back to England and his disappointment at her delay.

"No, you don't," said Elspeth, taking John by the arm. "Brother and sister indeed!"

People were streaming back to their seats. Hilary followed Mark in silence, to their place in the stalls.

The orchestra began, the curtain went up on a brilliant scene.

A hand touched Hilary's.

"You made me behave like a schoolboy," Mark said in her ear. "Sorry, darling."

Tears came to Hilary's eyes.

"If you knew," she said. "If you knew how I'd hurried for you. I'm sorry, too."

After that music, the lights, the gay performance were sheer joy to Hilary.

"We'll have supper at a little place I known" he told her. "You can collect your car afterwards."

Hilary did not know where he drove her, but he parked in a narrow street not far from Piccadilly Circus.

They went through a swing door into a small restaurant, with paneled walls in which were set branching lights. In a neat black box sat a large, black-gowned lady, and behind her on lighted shelves bottles gleamed with enticement.

"Good evening, Madame Gilbert," said Mark cheerfully and received a bow in acknowledgment.

"What a quaint little place!" said Hilary.

"Came here first with Morrison years ago," he told her. "Now supper before we both apologize to each other."

But there was no need of apology, for they were too delighted to be with each other, and Hilary had to hear of

his experiences in Switzerland. They were drinking coffee after a delicious, exquisitely cooked meal when there was a cry from behind a door in the paneling.

Madame Gilbert touched a hidden latch and moved out of the black box, while Hilary wondered idly why it did not move with her.

"Ah, *les petits,*" she said with a flash of black eyes from behind the gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

The paneled door opened, and a dark-eyed girl in a fur coat came out leading a small child by each hand. They were both rosy as if from sleep; they had been bundled into minute tartan slacks and traveling coats, and Madame Gilbert surveyed them with an affectionate, almost proprietary air.

Mark stood up.

"It is Mrs. Morrison, isn't it? I'm Mark Duncaster."

The dark-eyed girl stopped in an attempt to persuade the fair stolid blue-eyed boy from pulling at a tablecloth and the little girl with the dark curls from practising a dancing step.

"Oh, yes, of course. How do you do, Dr. Duncaster? Really, these twins of ours! This is Hector, and this is Marie Henriette. Drew is outside; we're driving north, through the night, so I put the twins to bed here with my aunt, Madame Adelie, and ran off to a theatre."

The swing door charged open and a tall man burst in.

"Etty, oh, there you are."

There was a confused greeting between the men, hurried introductions before the little family group was swept off. Mark saw Hilary's glance, wistful, reflective, almost longing. He could not know that she was thinking of the child she had met that afternoon, of the contrast between the happy family atmosphere of the Morrisons, and the life of Belinda.

He was puzzled by that expression.

IX

As soon as she could Hilary telephoned Mrs. Bott. She had tried, but had not always succeeded in detaching her thoughts from her patients with their varying needs.

There was Larry, called the Lamb when he was of a most unlamblike behavior, whose left foot would never be the same again since he had come in contact with an excitable box of fireworks. There was Evangeline, who lay docile and unmoved through visits from the physio-therapist and from a television charmer. Sometimes Hilary had had to assist with a sudden rush in casualty, but she found the problem of Belinda difficult to put aside.

Belinda had been taken to a local doctor.

"I think I'll have a word with him," Hilary said. "Could I telephone from here now? It would be easier than from the hospital."

She sat in the prim little sitting room where the telephone rested on a table among a row of cactus plants.

She explained herself to Dr. Forbison.

"I suggest I make an appointment for an X-ray of the child." he said. "I can give you a letter to the hospital. There's a definite defect of the heart; should mean an operation."

There was a spark of interest in his courteous, but weary voice. "I had a similar case a year or so ago, and Mr.—Now what was his name? Manchester, Doncaster, no, Duncaster—at St. Antholin's did it. But there would be the question of a bed there. I know how full they are and of course there would probably be delay."

Hilary thought of Sister Nannikott's lament.

"If we have a minute's lull, and you think you'll be able to straighten things out and cope, every child in London breaks its leg on a bicycle, puts its eye out or swallows something peculiar. All you can say is never a dull moment. How I wish there were!"

"I will see what I can do," she said. "Belinda's mother had enough money to cover special fees."

Hilary had called to take Belinda out in the car. There was no need to change the arrangement. Mrs. Bott, without the domination of her sister, was her old cheerful self.

"It's dreadful to think there has been a gap in the heart from her birth. And if nothing is done about it now, then she'll be at a disadvantage all her life, to say the least of it.

That breathlessness which we thought was just bronchial, my sister said there was more to it than that."

"Where is Belinda now?" asked Hilary after a pause, while she pondered sadly on the child's chances of life.

"Watching the television; how she loves it. Sits up on a chair, good as gold while it's on. I'm glad she can enjoy something here," said Mrs. Bott with a sigh. "But she'll love to come out with you."

There was so much against Belinda, the illegitimate birth, the uncertainty of Mrs. Bott's health, and now the chance of the slowing-down of every natural activity.

And yet, looking at Belinda's little face beside her in the car, with the soft fine hair tied into two bows on the top of her head, with her hands in white woolly gloves to match her leggings, Hilary thought she had rarely seen a child look so happy. In her short life Belinda had accepted so many changes, she seemed to have developed unconsciously the art of being happy with the present.

Her eyes grew wider at the swinging colored lights in the crowded streets. "Real fairies? Real clowns?" she asked.

Hilary nodded.

When the car had been parked Belinda clung to Hilary's hand tightly for the adventure of traveling on an escalator.

She was round-eyed with wonder, commenting in her own babbling fashion about the toys she saw. She was most interested in the ladder of toys, an artful arrangement near the top of the escalator, where the eyes of every child were at once drawn to the climbing array of fluffy teddy bears, grinning golliwogs, sophisticated dolls, in the latest wear of striped jeans and loose pullovers, their hair tied into pony tails.

Belinda stood entranced at the artful effect of movement, given by the strings tied to the feet, so that all the toys seemed to be climbing up the ladder.

"Look, he's falling down," she exclaimed acutely.

Hilary had not noticed, because she was smiling at Belinda's charming enthusiasm.

At the top, a smaller edition of the Teddy bears had caught his foot in the ladder and was hanging head downwards.

"Poor Teddy," moaned Belinda.

"Someone will put him up again," soothed Hilary, trying to draw the child away.

"His mummy will make him all right? His auntie?" queried Belinda, with anxiety.

Hilary promised.

"He might have to go away to be made better," she tried to explain to Belinda at tea time.

Even the attractions of red jelly and ice cream and a visit to Father Christmas in a snowy grotto, could not deflect Belinda from her main stream of thought.

Hilary thought how strange it was that the child's mind should dwell on the sickness of the doll and the Teddy bear which she loved.

She took Belinda away soon after their early tea. The child must not be overtired, but Belinda was fast asleep, snuggled against her arm, when they arrived at Mrs. Brown's home.

"I'll telephone again to find out when you take her for the X-ray," she said. "And at least you're a little better yourself, Mrs. Bott."

"Kidneys will never be the same again," said Mrs. Bott mournfully. "My sister wants me to stay on with her, but you know, she's not so fond of children, although Belinda's quite good compared to some."

"I know," agreed Hilary.

It was her evening off, and at last she had consented to have dinner at her uncle's flat.

She went early on the chance of seeing John alone, and a few minutes after her arrival, when she was watching the television screen in the lounge, he came in from the office.

"What a day I've had," he said, throwing himself into a long chair. "I need a drink."

Manrico brought the tray. Hilary waited impatiently until the man had gone.

"John, I must talk to you. Belinda is here, in London. I told you I met her, drove Mrs. Bott and her sister home, but I haven't had a chance to tell you the rest. I've been busy, and I didn't want to phone. She's to have an X-ray; I'm afraid there might have to be an operation. John, don't you want to see her?"

"No, I'm not going to see the kid," said John strongly. "What do you take me for? Admitting before a couple of women that I own the child? Don't you see how dangerous that is? Putting a weapon in the hands of people who might make use of it."

"I don't think Mrs. Bott is like that at all," said Hilary with as much heat as he had shown. "She's looked after that little scrap for a couple of years, since Violet had those jobs in Durban. She's genuinely fond of the child, but it's not fair to her. And she's ill herself. We have got to think ahead."

"There are . . . places, homes, surely."

He was restless now, prowling round the room, with his glass in his hand.

"Don't you see, I can't be mixed up in this, because of Uncle and Elspeth. If we were married it would be different; I might persuade her, but until then it's out of the question."

"I think you might find Elspeth more understanding than you think," Hilary spoke slowly. "If she loves you, she would take it better before you married her, than after."

But he took the man's view.

"What she doesn't know is not going to upset her. Afterwards is a different matter."

"I don't think being with Uncle Roger has done you any good," flashed Hilary. "You just want to put off everything, take no responsibility for anything. Sometimes I feel ashamed—"

"Now listen, Hil." He had turned round and brought the full battery of his pleading on her. "You know, Elspeth and her grandfather. You haven't met those grim old aunts of hers who took that line about her erring mother; you know her views. She'd turn me down at once, and I'd . . . well, I'd really go to the dogs without her."

Hilary tried to steel herself against this charm, which she knew of old. What was it about John that made one yield? Was he the eternal boy pleading to the maternal for help, for encouragement? She thought of her own mother's strictness, her rigid point of view.

"I wish mother were here," she sighed.

"She'd send me off with a whisk of the broom," he said with delight. "Game old girl, up to every trick."

That was the maddening part about him, whichever way you approached him, he could twist it to his own advantage. At least Mark Duncaster was not like that, she thought thankfully.

Her uncle Roger arrived, and brought with him Elspeth and her grandfather, Jock Medwin. There was no more time for private conversation.

"One of these days I'm going to pop in on you at the hospital and whisk you off for lunch," announced Elspeth. "Don't you think it would be a nice thing for me to do?"

"I should want warning," said Hilary. "Lots of things do crop up."

She thought the situation between Elspeth and John seemed happier and easier. When the girls were alone for a few minutes after dinner, she dared to ask, "You haven't made up your mind about John then?"

Elspeth smiled.

"He says I'm keeping him dangling on the end of a string."

"You mean you don't care for him, not enough?" Hilary asked.

She must be very tactful here.

Elspeth turned round and there were tears in her eyes.

"I do, I do. At first it was wonderful; we were swept along. There's something so utterly charming about him, I couldn't help myself. But I was brought up in a different way; my grandfather insisted. And there were my aunts too. He doesn't think John is . . . is sound enough. And when I pointed out to John that he had no safeguard with his uncle, that he wasn't really competent, he flew off the handle. That was a little while ago. But it was so awful without him, and then he rushed back to me, and . . . and it's all started again."

"I can understand that," said Hilary.

Out of the depth of her own happiness she could understand the division in the other girl's mind. She was not sure that John could stay the course. And if Elspeth knew what had happened in Rhodesia a few years ago, that John had left the girl he had loved to bear his child in loneliness and pride, she might not go on with the engagement.

"Well, there you are. Sorry to burden you with my doubts

and fears," said Elspeth lightly. "Let's go back. But I'm definitely against marrying him next week or next month, as he suggests."

"I'll back you in that," said Hilary. "I haven't been here long enough to get a frock for your wedding or a present either."

"Maybe you'll have a wedding first," said Elspeth.

When John drove Hilary back to the hospital she made one last attempt.

"John, do think about telling Elspeth. Suppose by some accident the story came out—how awful it would be!"

She was standing beside the car at the hospital gate, pleading with him. He turned away from her.

"Why, look who's here," he exclaimed with loud cheerfulness. Dr. Duncaster, do you medicos always keep such late hours?"

Hilary's unhappy expression changed at once to a flush of pleasure.

"What about you?" said Mark Duncaster.

She thought he had been called in on emergency and longed to ask questions.

"I've had to talk to my little sister and listen to her secrets," said John.

Hilary's glance reproached him. How like John to turn the tables on her!

When he had gone, Mark lingered.

"Enjoyed your evening?" he asked.

"Not really," she said. "Mark, I'd like to ask your advice sometime."

"Of course," he said.

"It's a child." She spoke with some hesitation.

"Patient?" he looked at her curiously.

"Not exactly. She's coming in for an X-ray soon."

"Let me know," he spoke formally. "I don't want to leave you, my dear, but I've a heavy day tomorrow."

Hilary learned the date of Mrs. Bott's visit to St. Antholin's with Belinda, and she tried to arrange the rounds of her ward to coincide with their appointment. She had looked into the long waitingroom, with its checked flooring, its counter where tea was served by volunteers, and the glass enclosure where

a rocking-horse and a miniature swing occupied some of the smaller visitors to this strange place, to note their arrival.

She rushed back again from her ward just as Mrs. Bott and her sister and Belinda were emerging into the side hall. She was still wearing her white coat, and at sight of it Belinda shrank back.

"It's the white coat," said Mrs. Bott soothingly. "Look, it's your Auntie, your Auntie Hilary."

Belinda peeped round, then beamed and moved towards Hilary.

"I could meet you for tea," Hilary said urgently. "There's a little place around the corner, no, not Joey's, a bit further on at the turn into the main streets, with plants in the window. If you go in and wait for me, I'll be along as soon as I can. Might be able to have a look at the X-ray plates while they're still wet."

She could enter the X-ray department and see the plates. She knew the worst.

"Where are you off to, my Rhodesian maid?" said a voice behind her.

"Mark, you gave me a start. What are you doing here?"

"On my lawful occasions. You looked quite guilty."

"I'm going out for a quick cup of tea," she said rapidly.

"With me, then."

"No, no, not now. I'll tell you about it later on, In fact I want to talk about it to you. It's those Rhodesian friends I told you about; the child has to have an op. You've been very busy, I know," she said. "Oh, I wish there were more time to talk to you."

"Now?" he tempted her, but she shook her head and hurried down the steps.

She had taken off the white coat which had horrified Belinda, and flung on the golden brown tweed coat which she wore in the car. If she took her car, parked as usual in the Alleyway, she could drive Belinda and the others home.

In the teashop, Belinda was seated by the window. Hilary could see the little face between the green plants which climbed in lacy fashion up and around the window. It might have been the shade of the plants which made her think the child's face had a greenish pallor.

She could not bear the thought of losing Belinda.

She went in gaily to see the child's face change as she waved a spoon at her and the ice cream flew on to Mrs. Brown's coat.

"Silly child," she said sharply.

"Hullo, Belinda," Hilary kissed the soft cheek.

Her heart was heavy at the prospect of this difficult operation on the heart of the small Belinda. She knew that already the child mattered to her, not only because of her friendship with her mother, not only because she was John's child, but for herself.

Belinda with her lovely seriousness taking care of the Teddy bear, wrapping and unwrapping him in odd scraps of garments, Belinda sitting at table and struggling with a large spoonful of porridge with tears in her eyes, Belinda running to meet her with laughter and outstretched arms—she loved Belinda for herself, and could never refuse the responsibility for her.

"She'll have to wait a long time to get into a bed in that hospital," sneered Mrs. Brown. "It's going to be a very expensive operation," she said with an emphasis on the adjective.

"Well?" asked Hilary. "Her mother left quite a large amount in insurance, and her executor has invested it in Rhodesia. But I will find the money at once myself. There's no question about it."

She had spoken hotly. She was more shaken than she cared to admit.

"Lucky to have you, isn't she?" Mrs. Brown said with an intonation which seemed like a sneer.

Belinda seemed to be puzzled at the change in her coat, and stroked the tweed as if to assure herself that this was the same Hilary.

After another ice cream for Belinda, Hilary drove the little party home.

"You come, you come too," said Belinda, pulling at her hand.

"Wish I could, my poppett, but when you go to the hospital again, I'll be there," she assured the child. "Do tell her that, Mrs. Bott, if it will make her feel better about it."

"She should be a bit more biddable, in my opinion," said Mrs. Brown harshly.

"It doesn't take a bit more trouble to explain things to her," said her sister.

Not for the first time Hilary wished that Mrs. Brown were more like her sister. There had been comfort and assurance in Mrs. Bott's simple little home by the sea in Natal; now in a more luxurious setting there was that rub of differing personalities.

The usual procedure was followed.

Belinda would come into the hospital, and since she was a heart case, and Hilary had expressed her preference, the child's name would be on Mark Duncaster's list.

"As if we hadn't enough to do," said Sister Nannikott, who was slightly annoyed at being moved from another ward to Lady Diana. "Full of special cases, all of a sudden. Though if they were all like that little girl—what's her name?—it would be easier."

"Belinda, she's a pet isn't she?" said Nurse Jones. "Can't think who she reminds me of. Those big eyes in that little face."

Belinda's life of changes, with Mrs. Bott at Hibiscus Bay, the Auntie who had visited her only at certain times, and then had gone away mysteriously, the new Auntie who loved her, the air trip and the little house in the suburbs, had given her a readiness to adapt herself to a new environment.

She was in bed with a lot of children in other beds. She looked at them with detached interest, the little colored girl across the ward, the small redheaded boy who put his tongue out at her.

Now there was another stranger, a tall man in a white coat who sat on the edge of her bed, and did strange things to her. But she smiled with touching confidence at him, with those big deep blue eyes, unusual in their shape and clearness.

"Well, Belinda how are you?" he asked her.

"Teddy isn't well, he fell off the ladder," she said, pushing forward a small Teddy bear around whose leg was a bandage.

"Fell off the ladder?" Mark Duncaster raised a quizzical eyebrow. "And what was he doing climbing the ladder?"

"In the shop," Belinda explained with patience, the long suffering at the slowness of adults. "With the other dollies. But he fell and hurted his leg. Auntie Hilary got him for me when I came to the hospital so that he can be made better."

Mark Duncaster studied the Teddy bear thoughtfully as if he felt Belinda's anxious eyes on him. Then he nodded.

"I think we can make him better."

But Belinda was not looking at him, she was looking at the door of the ward, and stretching out her arms. Hilary came straight towards them, trying to keep her pace from the urgency she felt.

"I'm here, Belinda. Good morning, Dr. Duncaster."

As she stood beside the bed, Belinda caught her hand and cuddled up to it instinctively and trustfully. Hilary smiled down at her.

It was her nature, he thought, her generous loving nature to appeal to and to respond to the need of a child, the child of a friend as she had so carefully explained.

X

"You haven't forgotten that it's a special 'do' this evening," Dr. Wedgwood said to Hilary that afternoon as they met for a cup of tea. "Don't eat too much. The City Fathers usually do us well."

"I'd quite forgotten," said Hilary, coming out of her reflections about Belinda. "What exactly is this affair?"

They were in the part of the diningroom called the "Cabin." It was a relief to sit back for a moment and sip her tea.

"This old City Livery Company takes a special interest in St. Antholin's, dates back to the first old Edward Manthorpe."

"Founder of the hospital?" asked Hilary. "Yes, of course I've heard of him. Eighteenth century wasn't it?"

"Yes, there's always been a close connection between St. Antholin's and the Company that he belonged to. Annual 'do'." Dr. Wedgwood's hand hesitated over a cream cake. "And they put on this reception in their very own hall, restored since the bombing, and everyone says thank you to

everyone else. The old boys wear their furry robes and chains of office, they light the chandeliers—their hall is certainly worth seeing. Nothing like it in your country."

"We've only been running for about sixty years, and you've had a few thousand," said Hilary nettled, then smiled as she met her friend's twinkling eyes.

"You always rise to it, don't you? I'm surprised you've forgotten the date, for you asked for an invitation for your brother."

"Now I remember. He told me he didn't need an invitation. Apparently Uncle Roger goes as a matter of course, so John goes too, and he has invited Elspeth."

"See you later then."

Dr. Wedgwood put the temptation of cream cakes away from her with an air of resolution, tempered by anticipation of the fare which would be put before her that evening.

Hilary rang up Mrs. Bott to give her the latest news of Belinda.

"She's settled down very nicely," she said. "I shall hear tomorrow which day her op. is down on the list. It will have to be fitted in with the other appointments of course."

"Can I come in and see her tomorrow?" Mrs. Bott asked anxiously.

"Yes, of course. In these circumstances, yes. I'll have a word with Sister. How are you? Are you feeling better?"

"Well, not really," Mrs. Bott spoke with an unusual weariness. "But I don't want Belinda to feel lonely, so I'll do my best to come in."

"Better not to come if you have a cold," warned Hilary. "There's usually a notice up at this time of the year, I find, warning people not to come if they have colds. Don't want a flu epidemic."

"Well, perhaps my sister will come then," Mrs. Bott temporized. "But I expect I shall feel better."

Hilary went up to her own room in one of the new blocks to change her dress. Her rota of duty would not begin until late that evening.

From her window high up she could look across at the lights in the other blocks and down into the well which was one of the courtyards where the bare trees stood like skeletons.

There was a dull red glow in the sky above, the reflection of the city lights, which gave her a sense of expectation, a quickening of the pulse.

She had been extravagant in buying the turquoise dress, she knew, with its frill of lace edging the low-cut satin bodice and lace skirt to match. She was just fastening the turquoise earrings into place when Dr. Wedgwood knocked at her door.

"Very nice," she said cheerfully. "Come along. Better to take my car. It's only a step, but in that get-up you can't walk."

Hilary had not appreciated the importance of the occasion. The car was put in a special park, tall policemen were on duty, there were lights on the steps in a narrow alley, and a red and white canopy had been put up to protect the guests. Not far away an old church which had been built after one great fire, and restored after another, sounded its new bell at the hour with a steady solemnity.

Mother would enjoy this, she thought.

Beyond the marble entrance a grand staircase led up past portraits of stout elderly gentlemen in impressive robes to the long rooms where the famous chandeliers glittered below the painted ceiling.

Hilary hardly noticed her greeting from the fur-robed host. She walked on with Dr. Wedgwood, dazzled by the reflection of the chandeliers in the mirrors. The effect was of one long chain of rooms and lights, and she was almost disappointed to find that she had come to the end of the hall, where white-clad tables held a grand display of shining silver and crystal and an even grander display of food.

Dr. Wedgwood listened to the speeches, glass in hand, with some impatience.

"Have my eye on that salmon," she whispered.

"Which patient did you say was digging her grave with her teeth?" Hilary whispered back.

"Wouldn't it be worth it?" her friend answered. "Who is this impressive gentleman?"

"Good gracious, Uncle Roger!" exclaimed Hilary.

Her uncle in regulation black and white greeted her more cordially than usual. She thought the toasts to St. Antholin's and the City Company had produced a mellowing effect, for

he stayed to talk to her, pointing out notables, telling her of the value of the famous silver plate.

"They don't make stuff like that nowadays," he said. "And you don't get the same strain of character either."

"Nonsense," said Dr. Wedgwood. "Fine young people every day. There's a handsome young specimen over there. Bless me, isn't that your brother, Hilary?"

She helped herself to another temptation from the waiter's tray. John was in a laughing group near the head of the stairs.

"Ha, my nephew John," said Uncle Roger thoughtfully. "Yes, he's doing pretty well. I keep an eye on him. I had my doubts of him at first."

"Why?" asked Hilary, in defense.

Dr. Wedgwood moved away from them in search for more provender.

"Is that lobster as you like it?" asked her uncle, with unusual concern. "I may say that they usually put on the best of everything. That's what I like. That's what I say to John, the best of everything. And that's what he's got to be. He's got looks, he can talk to people, but there's much more to it than that. Set a standard. I'd get rid of him if I found him out in anything disloyal or unfair."

Hilary started.

"I've hopes of getting him married to this nice girl, Elspeth. Where is she?"

"She's over there with some friends," Hilary said.

She gave her plate back to the waiter.

"High opinion of her. In these days, too. No hanky-panky. She wouldn't stand for it. That's what I like about her."

"Isn't your standard a bit rigid?" asked Hilary as lightly as she could. "No one is perfect."

How would her uncle take the knowledge that John had a child, and that child was in St. Antholin's hospital?

Now more than ever she could never tell the story, and she felt despondent that John could ever be persuaded to do so.

"Who's that girl beside Elspeth?" demanded her uncle suddenly. "Thought it was . . . it can't be. Yes."

He took out his spectacle case and fitted on the glasses he did not like wearing. "Well, so it is. Jock Medwin's other girl, the sister who kicked over the traces and ran away. Kitty

Medwin, can't remember her married name. I suppose old Jock brought her along."

Kitty Medwin! Hilary looked at the girl beside Elspeth with curiosity and interest. That was the name Mark had mentioned. This then was the girl he had wanted to marry, the girl who had disappointed him, who had run away from him and who had left a wound, a distrust of life which he had admitted and which was only now beginning to heal.

Standing together the two girls had a superficial likeness of figure and blonde hair. Elspeth was in white with a white fur wrap over her slender shoulders, but her sister wore a draped gown of vivid cerise which caught the eye at once. She had an air of careful grooming, of intense study of her appearance which made her brilliance seem brittle.

I'm not a bit like her, Hilary thought almost regretfully. Does Mark know she has come back to England, I wonder.

Mark should be here. She had looked for him, but she knew that it was quite possible that he had been detained.

Then Elspeth caught her eye, said something to her sister, and the group moved towards Hilary and her uncle.

"You remember Kitty, Mr. Fennell?" she asked. "And Kitty, you must meet John's sister. She's such a clever girl."

"You're from Rhodesia, I believe. What our hospitals would do without people overseas one really doesn't know," Kitty said, languidly, as if she had learnt the phrase by heart. "Of course, it's very noble of people, but really hospitals never appealed to me."

"Even if doctors did," said Elspeth, with a touch of slyness.

John laughed.

"What's that?" said his uncle testily. "What can I get you to drink, Mrs.—I've forgotten your married name. Shocking memory for names these days."

"Pereira," said Kitty languidly.

Hilary straightened her shoulders. Even if there had not been the knowledge that this was the girl whom Mark had wanted to marry, she did not think she would have liked her. Elspeth she felt was straight forward, but she was not sure about Kitty Medwin.

"Your husband is here, in England, I mean?" she asked politely.

"Left Tex behind in Venezuela; I expect he will turn up sometime." Kitty shrugged her shoulders.

Elspeth met Hilary's astonished eyes.

"She talks as if he were just a forgotten handbag, doesn't she?" she said with some amusement. "Here's someone who will be astonished to see you, Kitty. Here's Mark."

Hilary had been too occupied with the two girls to see Mark come to the top of the stairs, glance round, then make his way toward the figure in the turquoise blue. It was not until he had reached the group where the sisters stood with their backs to him that he recognized Elspeth's sister.

Hilary knew that she was watching him anxiously.

I am not jealous, she insisted to herself. What is it to me what happened before we met?

"Good gracious, Mark, what a surprise!" said Kitty, and now there was animation in her voice.

"How can it be a surprise when it's a St. Antholin's 'do', anyway, and Mark was nearly bound to come," said Elspeth. "You knew, Kitty. Mark, isn't she just the same?"

Mark had greeted the others before he took Kitty's outstretched hand and looked at her seriously. Hilary could not tell from his expression what he was thinking.

"It certainly is a surprise," he said. "You look as if South America—it was South America, wasn't it?—agrees with you."

She pouted.

"I believe you've forgotten all about me," she said.

"And a good thing too," said her sister quickly.

"Time flies too fast," said Roger Fennell with a sigh. "Seems only yesterday you went off. And I can't realize John has been with me well over four years now."

Hilary opened her mouth to contradict his mistake. John was standing beside her and he touched her arm in warning.

"Gets his years mixed up," he whispered. "I've learnt not to contradict by now."

"Four years?" asked Mark Duncaster thoughtfully.

There was a question drumming in his mind. It was ridiculous to remember the chance likeness of a small child to the girl he loved. Pure chance, he insisted. But so many little facts persisted to come up with questions. Hilary's de-

votion to the friends from Rhodesia he had not been allowed to meet, now her obvious discomfiture at some unimportant date. This evening he had wondered about John, but that was another impossible idea, especially in view of Roger Fennell's words.

It was crazy to be haunted by this suspicion.

He put it out of his mind with an effort.

Kitty Pereira drew the length of vivid cerise chiffon across her shoulders.

"One changes over the years," she remarked with a significant look at Mark.

"Come along, Kitty," said Elspeth. "There's Grandfather beckoning to us, and Mark want to talk to Dr. Hilary. Come along."

"Must I?" said Kitty. "Well, we must have a talk some other time, Mark. Hate to spoil your fun now."

She gave him a provocative glance over her shoulder.

"Don't let me detain you, Mark," said Hilary quietly.

He took her elbow and led her further along the room, out of the crowd towards the end of the buffet table.

"There are some lovely things to eat. Wedgie has a sound instinct in these things," she told him, noticing now the tired lines round his eyes. "You've had a busy day. What are you going to eat?"

He laughed at her seriousness, letting his doubts be swept aside.

"Did you think I'd waltz off with Kitty Medwin the minute she turned up?" he asked her acutely. "You don't trust me, then."

"Isn't it lovely food?" she refused to answer his statement. "Dr. Wedgwood is in a seventh heaven and is eating her way through everything."

"She has good taste. I'm hungry myself."

The waiter filled their glasses.

"I'm sorry I spoke like that," said Hilary repentantly. "She's quite lovely to look at. Only—"

"And you don't trust me? Is that it?"

"This concerns your life before you met me. It isn't my affair at all," Hilary said with as much steadiness as she could.

"Do you think so? And what about you?"

"People have no right to talk about people's lives before they met," Hilary insisted, trying to be reasonable about her own natural jealousy.

He was silent, wondering whether there were any other meaning behind her words. He saw her flushed face.

"Darling, have you had too much champagne?" he whispered with mischief. "People! People! Who are people? This is just between the two of us."

She drew a deep breath of relief.

"Then that's all right. I just was afraid—"

Suddenly the evening was wonderful to Hilary. Her eyes felt as dazzling as the chandeliers, the soft string music sounding in the distance from the musicians' gallery met her mood. She could not help slipping her hand into his own free one.

"Must we stay on here?" he asked.

"I think so," she said doubtfully "Oh, Mark, there is one thing. I don't know whether I should say it now. It's about one of your ops. next week.

"Next week?" he said. "Pretty full, I know. And I've a couple of lectures to fit in between ops."

"She's on your list. Belinda Fanshawe," persisted Hilary.

"Ah, yes, I've seen her," he said after a pause.

"I'd like to watch it. You won't mind? I've never seen you at work."

"If you wish." He was a little surprised.

"Could I be there? I mean, to watch it, like the students do, from the gallery?" she asked abruptly.

She had never known him pause so long for words.

"It will be a long job," he said thoughtfully, "and I don't suppose you'll see much. Sometimes I dash out and give a few notes on the case, dictate them straight away to a useful little secretary just for the record. I shan't have time for a word with you"

"I didn't expect it," said Hilary. "It's just that I'd like to be there."

"Why are you so interested in this case?" he asked suddenly. "You've never bothered before."

"Now has there been time?" asked Hilary. "But I do take a special interest in Belinda."

"Of course, she must belong to those friends of yours from Rhodesia. Now I come to think of it," he said, "you haven't been quite the same since they arrived, you know."

"Nonsense," said Hilary.

She had flushed again.

It would be such a relief to tell him the whole story, reveal her problem.

"I'm not a jealous man," he began and then added suddenly, with his disarming smile, "Yes, I am. I want you to myself."

"And my work?" she asked. "You'd never ask me to give up that?"

She was looking away from him toward the reflection of the brilliant chandeliers in the mirrors.

"If there were our children?" he questioned deliberately.

She started. "Why did you say that?" she asked. "When they were small, of course, for a time." Now her lips curved in a smile, for she was remembering Belinda, her soft roundness, her appealing ways, the unconscious demand of the young on her own personality. It would not be easy, but it would be worthwhile. This short time of acquaintance with Belinda had opened another door in her life.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked. "I've never seen you look quite like that before."

"We might even adopt one," she suggested. "Mark, Wedgie is waving to me. We have to be back. I'm on call."

He exclaimed in protest at her first sentence. "Do you think it will be necessary? Hilary, I would like to ask you—"

She smiled up at him, and the trusting innocent look was maddeningly like that of the child Belinda.

He must be mad to cherish suspicion and yet—

"And now you can't stay with me for old Sir Hubert is bearing down on you," said Hilary.

The famous old man was limping towards them, the limp not in the least restraining his vitality. He looked as smart, as dapper as he did when leading his students round the wards to see one of his pet cases. Now he wagged a warning finger at Mark in the familiar manner.

"My boy, a word with you."

Mark sighed. This meant a long session of hospital matters, he knew. Hilary gave him a mischievous glance as she followed Dr. Wedgwood.

"Time for the Cinderellas to go back," she said briskly. "Just been having a chat with your brother's girl, nice creature. Wants to look round the hospital, so I told her when to come. She knows the Matron at Manor Lea, our convalescent home, old pal of mine."

"You mean Elspeth, Elspeth Medwin?" Hilary asked, bringing her thoughts back from Mark with difficulty. She thought he had looked overtired and strained.

"Yes. Plenty of money there too, to be a useful patron at Christmas."

"The things you think of," said Hilary.

She hoped that Elspeth would not be visiting St. Antholin's for a week or two. But she might not even go into the Lady Diana ward.

Hilary would prefer that she should not see Belinda.

She went back to the hospital and changed her dress, going over the few words she had had with Mark.

She did not know how that conversation lingered with him. He would have another look at the small child called Belinda as soon as he could. Probably on Monday.

But it was not until the afternoon that he was free to go to her.

Going swiftly and quietly as usual along the corridor he heard Sister Cunningham's incisive words, in that clear voice which carried beyond the door of the sterilizing room.

"If this is the last thing I say," Mark smiled at the favorite remark of hers, "this is a patient, and her relationships have nothing to do with the case. I will thank you girls to spend your time on sterilizing, not on gossip."

She swept out, silver-gray wings of hair under her stiff cap almost quivering with her indignation.

Sister Cunningham on the war path, he thought with amusement as she gave him a chilly nod and went on her way. Then he heard the slightly tearful voice from the room Sister Cunningham had left.

"All I said was that she was from Rhodesia too. Perhaps

it's no wonder that Dr. Hilary was so very interested in her, and the eyes were the same."

"No gossip, girls," mimicked another girl's voice, and a rush of steam drowned a third girl's remark.

"Well, anyone can see the likeness, I don't care what she says. Every little thing—"

He went on, feeling a cold anger at the girls' chatter, at the revival of his own doubts. If he had not heard last night old Roger Fennell's confirmation of John's stay in England, he might have put those doubts aside.

It could not be true. Yet every little circumstance, the change in Hilary, since these people had come from Rhodesia, her concern, her insistence on watching the operation, all these piled up together.

He went into the ward.

There was a thin-lipped woman beside Belinda's bed, and he noticed that the child looked almost apprehensive.

Sister Nannikott rustled up to him, but then was called away to the interphone.

The thin-lipped woman said, "I'll go, of course. I've been a nurse myself. Poor little thing, no mother to own her."

"I understand the mother is dead," he said, moving to the side of the child, intent on her.

Mrs. Brown made a motion with her head that caught his attention. Her knowing smile was unpleasant.

"Least said, soonest mended," she said. "Some people aren't blind. My sister's carried the can long enough. That's what I tell her. I made her stay home today, not well. Time for someone else to worry about the child. You don't have to look far to see who she takes after."

XI

MARK COULD have struck the woman for the insinuation which matched his own doubt.

The eyes! The eyes of Hilary which he had loved at first sight at the Victoria Falls, the eyes which he had declared

were so unusual, the eyes of Belinda which he saw now smiling up at him so confidingly.

She pointed to yet another bandage round the long-suffering animals which she loved.

"Poor Teddy," she said, and her pitying smile was like the smile of Hilary when he had first seen her with the child.

He could endure no more. Sister had returned, and he acted as if he had not heard the words from the visitor beside Belinda's bed. He walked with Sister to the door of the ward, answered her brusquely. In the familiar corridor, although alone, it was as if he walked with a stranger. A stranger racked with jealousy, with anger, resentment, with suspicion, yet struggling with reason, with memory working on every word, on every incident, trying to reconcile the present with the past.

He had told her about Kitty Medwin, who was now Kitty Pereira. He had trusted Hilary with that truth. He remembered with a sharp pang her insistence that what had happened before they met had nothing to do with their love for each other. It was true, but had she meant Belinda?

She had even spoken about adoption. Good Heavens! Was this the child she had had in mind? To bring with her to their marriage this child of hers?

How could he bear it?

This woman who had spoken to him in the hospital, who was she? Was she the woman who had looked after the small Belinda in . . . where was it? Born in Natal, he seemed to remember from the records. Or had Hilary mentioned that fact?

The woman had spoken in her crude phrase about other people carrying the can. As if Hilary had been obliged recently to take over a responsibility which she had disclaimed.

That was not like Hilary, the Hilary he knew.

There was some contradiction here. He would go mad with one conjecture after the other; he must stop thinking about the whole thing.

Then there came revulsion from his trend of thought.

Hilary, why didn't you tell me? You seemed so innocent, the change came only—when did it all begin?

Fanshawe, the child's name. That had been the name of the girl at the hotel, whose death had distressed Hilary so much. He had thought that her distress had been unusual and almost excessive, as if she had been disturbed and afraid of something. Had the girl called Fanshawe known the secret, adopted the child, given it her name?

Hilary had spoken thoughtfully of a problem which was beginning for her.

He was distorting every past event in the light of a cruel suspicion. Surely there was some explanation. Perhaps he was exaggerating the mysterious likeness of the eyes. But the nurses had seen it, had remarked on it to each other. It would take more than Sister Cunningham's strictness to prevent gossip of that sort from running through St. Antholin's.

He hated that thought, for herself as well as for his own sake.

Hilary must have been aware of the risk she ran in having the child in this hospital, but she had not thought of that. Surely that was evidence of innocence.

His mood brightened. He must seek for some explanation. Her brother John, surely he would know.

Another thought struck him. The family likeness, could that have been inherited from John? Could the child possibly be the child of John, and not of Hilary?

Why not?

He did not realize that he had stood still by one of the glass doors leading into the courtyard where the bare branches of the plane trees held the seed-balls of the future.

He could find a moment with John to lead up to the subject, somehow he must find the truth.

He must not forget that the name of Belinda Fanshawe was on his list for tomorrow, the child would lie unconscious before him while his task would be to probe the secret of her small heart.

He must see Hilary's brother.

He had his work to think of, his full list. Thank Heaven for his demanding work in the theatre.

Hilary was busy too that day. There were new entrants: Marilyn who had fitted a saucepan on her head too well,

Bobby who had swallowed a number of pretty pills thinking they were sweets, and who was astonished to wake up in hospital.

"Lucky he woke up at all," said Nurse O'Brien briefly. "Did you see Dr. Duncaster this morning? Never known him so short-tempered. Anyone would think he was old Sir Hubert. Not like him at all to bite Sister's head off, though I've often wanted to do it myself."

"He's going out with a blonde," said Nurse Jones sentimentally, while her efficient fingers laid out a trolly. "Saw him getting into her car this evening."

Nurse Jones had not been the only one who had seen Mark Duncaster with the blonde Kitty Pereria. Hilary had half expected Mark to telephone her that day, but she had assumed that he was busy.

It was disappointing that she should see him hurrying down the wide steps from the hall, and be unable to catch up with him, and even more disappointing to see him getting into a car where a fur-clad arm was extended by the fair-haired woman in the driver's seat.

Hilary did not know that Kitty Pereira had telephoned him, and when he rejected her offer of a meeting, giving his lecture at the University as an excuse, she had said that she would drive him there.

"Otherwise I shall think you're afraid to see me again," she said beguilingly.

"Good Heavens, no," he answered, and so was committed.

Kitty Medwin had promised to marry him once, had smiled sweetly and innocently and all the time had been carrying on her affair with Tex Pereira. There had been nothing in her face or manner during those months with him to suggest her deliberate unfaithfulness. Perhaps Hilary West had the same feminine capability of acting.

"You needn't glower at me," said Kitty sweetly, as she pulled up the car at traffic lights. "This was the only way I could get at you; you've made one excuse after another."

"What's the point, Kitty?" he asked.

The softness of her fur sleeve touched his hand, recalling other moments together. He guessed at once what she was

doing, attempting a deliberate revival of the old days. And in his present mood, he knew that she was dangerous to him.

"When is your husband coming home?" he asked her, and she smiled at the roughness of his tone.

"He is home . . . in Venezuela," she answered sweetly.

"I meant, coming to you." He knew that his words sounded clumsy.

"I don't know that he will, or even that I want him to." He was concerned now.

"Do you mean that?"

"I'm not sure," she sighed. "Mark, if I've made a dreadful mistake in marrying Tex, must I suffer for it all my life? After all, I've money of my own."

He was silent, in bitterness. This was like Kitty, he knew, intent on having the best of both lives.

But she could not have his life again.

It might be pain to hear her pleading voice, to realize that she had taken the well-remembered route through the London squares on purpose, but it was a pain he accepted.

Also it had the illogical effect of deepening his distrust of Hilary.

He looked at his wrist watch. "I must go in now, Kitty."

She turned towards him, and he saw the pleading in her face.

"You're not very sympathetic," she whispered. "I've been terribly unhappy, Mark. That's why I came back. That's why I wanted to talk to you."

She had put out her soft pretty hand, and he saw the rings glinting on it, the rings Pereira had given her.

"Perhaps it will help if I tell you that I changed my mind when you changed yours," he said as steadily as he could.

The temptation Kitty was offering him was blatant enough, whether it was genuine or not.

He opened the car door.

"But we haven't had a chance to talk," cried Kitty in protest. "You can't refuse me. Come around to the hotel, do, please, Mark. Elspeth and some of her friends will be dropping in."

He turned back.

"John" he asked sharply. "John will be there?"

"John, the good-looking young man Elspeth has been keeping dangling too long?" asked Kitty, with an odd laugh. "Oh, yes, he sure to be there."

For a second only Mark Duncaster hesitated.

This would be a chance to see John West, possibly the only chance. And he would then find out from him the truth about Hilary.

"All right, I'll come round when I've finished," he said, "An hour and a half probably."

"You'll be welcome," said Kitty, with mock sedateness.

It was nearly two hours later that Mark Duncaster arrived at the hotel where Elspeth and her sister were staying. He was directed to Mrs. Pereira's suite, and found Elspeth acting as hostess to the friends she had invited after her shopping expedition.

Mark looked round the modern room with its sweep of orange curtains, the zigzag black and white of the walls, the guests already supplied with glasses and cigarettes.

"Where's Kitty? And I wanted to see John too."

"They've just gone down to the cocktail bar. Kitty said it was too tame here. She'll be here in a moment."

Elspeth hesitated.

"Mark, are you going to let Kitty get away with things as she did before?"

"No," exploded Mark. "And for Heaven's sake leave the whole thing alone."

Elspeth looked alarmed.

"I'm sorry I got off with the wrong foot. You haven't seen Hilary today?"

"No, I haven't," snapped Mark.

"That must be why," murmured Elspeth, nodding her head in a wise manner especially irritating to a tired man. "I only saw her for a moment this morning when I went to St. Antholin's myself."

"Sorry I was jumpy, Elspeth. Cheers."

He raised his glass to her.

There was the sound of laughter at the door, and Kitty and John came in together, apparently on the best of terms.

Elspeth looked quickly over her shoulder at Mark and spoke in a whisper.

"You know she does it all on purpose, to hurt," she said. "It was always like that. I try not to mind."

Yes, Kitty had always been like that. As he saw her coming forward with her hand resting very lightly on John's arm, the slim black dress emphasizing every line of her figure, Mark could afford a bitter smile. She had taken pleasure in hurting Elspeth by deliberately walking off with John, even on such a trivial occasion.

He must contrive a few minutes with John, and then he could escape.

"What on earth were you doing at the hospital, Elspeth?" he repeated as the others joined them.

"You went to St. Antholin's, Elspeth?" asked John, and the glass he was lifting to his lips rested halfway.

"I said I would," Elspeth answered with her usual tranquility. "I promised to drive Matron from Manor Lea up to see an old friend of hers who may be retiring next year."

"Sister Cunningham, I'll be bound," said Mark.

"And I took some decorations for the wards, and little things for the children, that's all."

"Did you see Hilary's protegée?" asked Mark as carelessly as he could, with his eyes on John, and saw the glass waver as it was lifted to the young man's lips.

"The little girl called Belinda? Yes, I saw her."

John stood quite still, his eyes on her.

"I didn't talk to her. She was curled up, fast asleep."

Mark could not mistake the relief on John's face. As Elspeth drew her sister away for a moment, Mark moved towards him.

"There was an odd woman with the child when I saw her today," he said boldly. "Seemed to be hinting that there was a family likeness between Hilary and the child."

Over John's face came such a look of dismay that Mark was troubled.

"Rubbish, that woman is a mischief-maker," he said thickly. "But I warned Hilary that it wasn't wise to take her into St. Antholin's; people might notice."

Mark was perplexed, his impression divided.

Hilary had wished to do the best for the child.

John's concern seemed to be for Hilary's sake.

Elspeth was turning round to smile at them.

"For Heaven's sake don't talk about this child, there's a good fellow," began John in an impatient whisper. "I can't let Hilary down."

The two girls were beside them, Kitty running the glittering bracelets up and down her bare arm in a familiar gesture

"What are you two talking about?" asked Elspeth. "This is a party where you circulate, you two."

"Sorry, I can't stay," Mark said seriously.

"You haven't even asked my impressions of your hospital," Elspeth teased him.

John was staring at her. Mark thought that the time spent in the cocktail bar and with Kitty had disturbed his usual good temper.

"You went to St. Antholin's?" he demanded. "What was in your mind, then, Elspeth?"

"Good gracious, what a question. I've always meant to go; Hilary said it would be in order. Why shouldn't I go?"

"Yes, yes, of course," he muttered.

"You didn't mean that you must leave the party, Mark," said Kitty pleadingly. "I may not be going back to Venezuela."

"The clock doesn't turn back, you know, for me," he answered.

For a second her eyes lost their pleading for anger.

John was following him to the door.

"Don't get me wrong, old fellow," he said. "Elspeth shouldn't have gone. It would upset Hilary too."

"What are you talking about? You may have had a little too much to drink," said Mark. "But if you could explain—"

John drew himself up in a stately fashion.

"You don't expect me to let my own sister down," he said.

There was a pause between them, a pause in which John realized the horror of what he had said.

"Good-bye," said Mark and went out, his last hope gone.

Hilary did not sleep much the night before Belinda's operation.

One thing she could not resist doing was to telephone Mark early the next morning. She had rarely done this before, but she felt disturbed and anxious.

His voice sounded strained.

"You haven't anything to tell me?" he asked, more gravely than usual.

"No, what is there to tell?" she asked. "I did telephone last night, but your friend Barry said you were out. He said Mrs. Pereira had telephoned you several times too."

She could not resist that remark. Ever since that meeting at the City Hall with Kitty the memory of that glance over the girl's shoulder, so lightly covered in cerise chiffon, had stung her.

"Yes," he said.

"Mark, is anything the matter? I mean, you sound different."

Kitty Pereira had telephoned, him, he had gone out with her in the car, he had been with her at some party last night probably. Perhaps he was regretting the marriage of Kitty, the engagement to herself. He was comparing her with the other girl, to her own disadvantage. It was no wonder, thought Hilary despondently. He was so clever, so experienced; she had been a novelty after his disappointment with Kitty Pereira.

She had to come straight out with her doubts.

"You know, Mark, if you ever change your mind, you must tell me," she said, as if the words were not a contradiction of every nerve in her body. "I shall understand."

"Why do you say that to me just now?" he demanded angrily. "Why bring this up now?"

"I . . . I only rang up because I was concerned about the op. One good thing, Belinda is too small to worry about it."

"Yes," he said slowly. "There's a touching confidence in them at that age."

Belinda was in the thoughts of both of them. Hilary hurried through her own work, told the telephone operator where she would be, and made her way up to the top floor, to the theatre where she knew Mark would be.

As it happened he was a few seconds late so that they ran into each other at the bend in the corridor.

To see her now was disturbing and distressing to him. He could not hold back the words.

"Hilary, if you'd told me, I'd have tried to understand. You didn't trust me. Why did you keep it from me?"

She stared at him, and he saw with pain how like the eyes were in shape, in color, to the eyes of the child Belinda.

That glance from the wide open innocent eyes seemed to tear the next words out of him.

"Did you think I wouldn't do the best for your child?" he said in that low, deep voice, and moved away.

XII

HILARY STOOD perfectly still, watching the tall figure turn in at the door. She felt numbed, stricken at his words. Then a flush of anger came to her cheeks.

Students and nurses were coming up behind her, the earnest young Nigerian with the gold-rimmed eyeglasses, the little Chinese nurse whose English was so surprisingly fluent, the nurses in the caps and belts which fitted their status. Hilary moved with them into the gallery.

"What is the case?" asked one girl in front of Hilary, opening her notebook and yawning heartily.

Case! Yes, of course, that was what Belinda was to them. Just another case, a test of a surgeon's skill, words in a notebook, knowledge to be used at an examination, experience perhaps to be tried in very different conditions.

This small white bundle, now wheeled in on the trolley, had been sent to sleep a short time ago by the prick of a needle. She could not see the strange creatures about her, masked and gloved and booted in white, she knew nothing of the machine which would supply oxygen to her when she was unable to draw it in for herself.

Yes, this was Belinda.

And the tall figure in white, looking taller than usual in the surgeon's uniform, was Mark, the man she loved, the man who had spoken so cruelly to her, the man who believed that this was her child, her secret.

Hilary wanted to scream, to move from her place on the bench, she felt that her knees were trembling, that her hands would tremble in anguish unless she locked them together.

Mark had wronged her, misjudged her, given her no chance of explanation. She forgot that she had become used to the situation, that she had accepted the responsibility ignoring how it must appear to other people. He had no right to say those words to her in anger, to judge without explanation.

Hilary contrived to sit quite still, but she had missed the preliminaries of the operation. She had seen operations before, so that one part of her mind accepted the procedure, while at the same time she was confused with the words she wanted to call out to Mark.

How strange that he should have spoken to her of this particular operation months ago. Where was it? At the Victoria Falls. She half-closed her eyes, she felt the rich sunshine, smelt the scent of tropic woodlands, she heard the rush of the Zambezi river, saw the millions of gallons falling over the cliff edge.

"Are you all right, Dr. Hilary?" asked the girl beside her with some anxiety.

Hilary managed to smile and nod at the little Welsh nurse.

She knew that the incision must now have been made from the sternal edge to the mid-axillary line in the fifth left interspace. He had once told her that this was the most satisfactory approach.

Would Mark remember that he had talked to her of this while he worked on Belinda's heart?

Now the pleura was opened. He would have to be careful. Now the rib spreader was being inserted. No. Mark was discarding that to the attendant Sister.

"Pericardium opened," one student whispered to the other as they divided their time between their notebooks and their observation.

"It's a child, isn't it?" muttered the other. "Ideal patient child with an uncomplicated ventricle septal defect. Pericardium can be opened in front of phrenic nerve for its full length in that case."

Hilary knew that this must be done so that Mark could see

the type of cardiac arrest and the color of the heart could be determined.

What was he thinking? Was his mind only on his skill and his responsibility, the task for which he had been trained? Or did he resent the thought that that was her child?

Hilary flamed with anger. How dared he? He thought this was her child. Surely the likeness of the eyes was not enough to convince him. That fact might cause gossip among the nurses. He need not have condemned before he asked for an explanation.

Hilary held her breath. She hated the scribbling of the pen beside her, the sniffling of one girl, the shadowless lights, the white-clad group which seemed almost motionless, the whine of the machine.

She remembered the weight of Belinda's soft little body on her lap, the clutching hand at the new experience of the escalator, the concern about poor Teddy and his bandages.

Now the left hand of the surgeon was over the right side of the child's heart, his thumb would be on the left side.

Literally, at this moment, he held Belinda's heart in his hand.

And not only Belinda's but mine, thought Hilary.

The words might be as the student quoted, "the whole ventrical mass to be cupped in the palm," Hilary knew, but she felt stilled and numb, as if her own heart was bare.

She knew that the surgeon must keep up this rhythm, the life-saving cardiac output could be maintained at the steady correct pressure of once a second. Faster, faster, she thought, and then her own medical knowledge reproved her. If Mark used a faster motion he would cause his own fatigue. There must be no break in the manipulation until the heart turned pink.

Hilary found that with the tangle of her own emotions she was missing details.

The time went on, now the sutures were being placed, but left untied. The time—where had it gone? She felt as if she had been sitting there for hours; her eyes ached, her limbs were stiff.

Mark was bending down watching earnestly.

The prayer in her heart was for both of them, for the patient and the surgeon.

It doesn't matter what he thinks of me; all that matters is Belinda's life.

The jet of blood must be forceful now for the sutures were being pulled tight.

"A neat job," said the young Nigerian student, closing his notebook.

The group was moving out, and presently Hilary followed them, not caring that they pushed past her. She had not meant to be in the corridor when Mark came from the theatre by the side door. He must have been quick in the automatic discarding of his uniform.

Through the half open door she saw the bins of white coats, the swabs and gloves where nurses were already working on their task of tidying up. Far down the corridor was the trolley with the white bundle on its way to a special ward. Belinda could not be in the general ward until the danger was over.

Hilary hesitated. Mark looked subtly older, she thought, and there was a rush of tenderness in her. He was flexing his fingers automatically, a gesture which she recognized.

"It was wonderful," she breathed. "Thank you."

He stared at her almost angrily.

"What did you expect? I'd have done the same for any child, yours or not," he said crisply as he passed her.

She wanted to cry out his name but she could not do that here in the little group of students and nurses going off to lunch, chattering of dates for coffee, examinations, the trials of working under particular Sisters.

First she must have a word with Mrs. Bott in the waiting-room. She made her way down in the lift, hardly aware of the other people around her. Belinda would be in the ward now, probably in an oxygen tent, and a nurse would be with her all the time.

She went toward the row of waitingrooms, taking the short cut, as the experienced staff did, through the courtyard and across the main hall.

At the enquiry desk there was a figure in a pale colored fur coat, a coat which toned with the flowing blonde hair.

For a moment Hilary thought it was Elspeth, who knew of her interest in this particular patient, and then, as the girl turned her head, she realized that it was Kitty Pereira.

What in the world was she doing in St. Antholin's, Hilary wondered, as she went on to the waitingroom.

Mrs. Alvina Bott was sitting in one of the chairs by the window. She had some white knitting on her lap, but had laid it down and was staring disconsolately out of the window.

"It's all right," Hilary said softly. "She's back in the ward and we shall just have to be patient until she comes round."

"Will she be sick?" asked Mrs. Bott. "She hated to be sick even when she was a tiny mite."

"I don't expect so," said Hilary. "The stuff she had might not even affect her. But she'll have to be kept very quiet."

Mrs. Bott wiped her eyes.

"I didn't want Lilian to come with me today," she said with determination. "She means well, and of course she's very generous to us both, but there's something about her at times—"

Hilary nodded.

"And how I long for a bit of sunshine," said Mrs. Bott, in a peevish tone. "Gray all the time. I'd forgotten how gray England can be while I was away."

Hilary understood that the woman was venting her relief at the news about Belinda on a safe subject like the weather.

"I long for the sun myself," she said, and suddenly a wave of longing for her own country swept over her, for the high, clear sky, the view across bush and rocks, the dry smell of burning wood, the sense of space.

"I'll telephone you with the latest news this evening," she promised. "I'm only sorry I can't drive you home today, but I'm tied up."

The longing for her own country was so strong in her that again she crossed the main hall. She could have ten minutes in the fresh air, or what passed for fresh air in this gray city with its traffic, its hard pavements, its crowds of unknown people. So that she was in the hall again when the lift door opened and Mark Duncaster came out, crossing her path

without noticing her. At the desk the blonde girl in the blonde fur coat rose at once.

"There you are, darling, at last. Like old times, isn't it? I said I'd wait for you," she said, taking Mark's arm.

Hilary could not see his face but he had not withdrawn. She turned blindly away from the couple descending the wide steps in the direction of the Alley way where the staff cars were parked.

Kitty Pereira had been waiting for him; the appointment must have been arranged. Mark must have known that she was there. He had gone with her without a glance at Hilary.

A wave of anger swept over the girl, already concerned about Belinda. The sudden change in him, was it only because of what he believed about the child? Hadn't there been a change in him since . . . yes, since Kitty Pereira had appeared that evening at the City Hall? Yes, that might be the reason, the hidden reason for the change in him. She faced the fact bitterly that he might have changed on meeting his old love again. She had treated him badly, he might resent her, but he might easily feel the old fascination.

It was no good sinking into this state of mind. She had work to do.

In addition to taking over part of the casualty section ...e next day, where a sudden emergency of a nearby warehouse fire brought a rush of patients to St. Antholin's, she visited Belinda, the same unconscious little white bundle with the special nurse beside her.

"I've put the Teddy bear where she can see it when she wakes up," said the girl.

Hilary adjusted the slipped bandage on the Teddy bear whose fur had not been improved by ardent washing in imitation of ward routine. His figure had also suffered by much devoted cuddling.

"Dr. Duncaster came in to look at her late last night," the nurse said. "Must have come in after a party."

"Is he pleased with her, I wonder?" asked Hilary.

"It was a wonderful op.," said the girl. "I think he's wonderful."

A not unusual case of hero worship, thought Hilary with a faint smile. How she would have loved to relate this to

Mark and hear his chuckle of amusement! But that was impossible now.

At lunch time instead of going to the "Cabin" she decided to go out. She did not feel hungry; she did not know what she was going to do. She decided not to take the car; she would walk in the clear, frosty air. She could make the excuse to herself of posting her airmail letters to Rhodesia. Anything to escape from the atmosphere of St. Antholin's, her love and her responsibility.

The sky was pale blue, unexpectedly clear. Her footsteps rang on the pavement. Now she was passing the long flagged entrance to the little church next to the hospital. It was so near, yet she had never been inside it. On the impulse she turned and walked along the flagged pathway which had known the tread of so many famous people. She had heard Dr. Appleby with his antiquarian interest speak of the plague carts which had rumbled past this place, of the fire which had ravaged old London houses clustered around but had not harmed the church, of his own adventures as a student dealing with a bomb lodged in the roof.

She passed under the Norman arch, between the thick round pillars, and sank down on one of the rush chairs.

She had brought her prayers for Belinda, her fears for the future, her bitterness against Mark, her jealousy of Kit Pereira to this small gray building which had known so much of turmoil.

There were great golden chrysanthemums on the altar; their curled petals seemed to shine in the candlelight.

Presently Hilary rose from her knees and went toward the porch. The girls in the dark blue cloaks of St. Antholin's were coming in, and she saw that one of them was the Nurse Jones whom she knew.

"So glad to know that Belinda's op. was successful," said Nurse Jones with her usual impulsiveness. "Her mother would be so glad."

The other girl nudged her slightly.

"I was thinking about her mother," said Hilary. "She died this year, only a few months ago, but Belinda doesn't know."

She went through the archway, and the girls stared after her.

"You know what they're saying, Jonesy," said her companion, "and you went and put your foot right in it."

"I don't care," her friend answered defiantly. "And you know, I believe she was speaking the truth."

"We-e-ll," the girl spoke judiciously. "Yes, maybe you're right. And I believe she'd been crying."

"Lots of people come in here to say thank you after an op.," said Nurse Jones brightly. "It's a nice thing to do."

Hilary walked toward the busy thoroughfare, and she was passing the little coffee shop known as Joey's, and next to it the slip of a window which sold stockings and small necessities of the toilet, when she heard her name called by a familiar voice.

She recognized the car, her brother's head thrust out of the window.

"Hullo, there?" he cried. "Walking along in a dream. Jump in. Where are you going?"

"It's my lunch time. What are you doing round here? Oh, John, did you come to enquire about Belinda?"

"Well, not exactly," he said. "I had some business just now, thought I'd pass and look in. Save the trouble of phoning. How is she?"

Hilary's sad face brightened.

"I'm glad you're concerned about her. John, I think it's going to be all right. Of course she hasn't come round yet, maybe tonight. It's such a delicate business, it has to be done quickly yet properly timed, you know. And of course her age is in her favor. A child can recover quickly, too."

"Good," he nodded, but his thoughts seemed faraway. "Look Uncle's coughed up with something for me. Let me give you some money."

He was turning the car into a car park.

"I often use this place. And there's a restaurant nearby where we can have a bite. But wait, Hilary. I'll give you the money now."

Hilary had expected that he would give her a check, but she was surprised that he took from his wallet a thick wad of notes, peeled off several, folded them and handed them to her.

"But these are five pound notes, and so many!" she explained.

"Well, what about it?" he asked easily. "You've taken the racket for the poor little kid. Not her fault. But look here, Hil, I don't want to be mixed up in it."

Hilary looked at him with a mixture of exasperation and affection.

"She isn't in desperate need of money, of course. Violet left something for her, and Mr. Wellingdon makes payments from Salisbury. But it isn't just the money, John, it's more than that."

"You needn't think I shall tell Elspeth," said John and his mouth was set in an unusually hard line.

"And where did you get all that cash?" asked Hilary curiously.

He laughed and put an arm round her shoulder.

"Cashed a nice big check. Come on and eat."

"I can't stay long," she warned him.

"Neither can I," he grinned.

For that half hour when they sat in the corner of a crowded favorite City restaurant he was his old charming self. He teased her affectionately. Only when he was paying the bill did he say, "If Elspeth had been as much fun as her sister, things might have been different."

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

"Obvious, isn't it? Kitty Pereira is on the lookout for a new husband; she's ditching the old one. Probably trying out her old fiancé again, from all I can see."

He was holding the door open for her and Hilary passed into the clear frosty air, the roar of the traffic, with a sense of shock.

"Do you really think that?" she asked him.

John was not usually the most observant of men. What had given him this impression about Kitty and Mark?

"Why do you think that?" she repeated, trying to keep step with him along the crowded pavement.

"Of course, you're interested in Duncaster yourself, aren't you?" he asked casually. "I've seen them at a couple of "do's" the last two nights, and he's certainly in the running. And she's not a slow mover."

"I'm not sure that I believe you," Hilary spoke with unusual slowness.

"Hop in," said John irritably, as they reached the car. "You can take my word for it."

Hilary was silent as they wound through the traffic, turning at last towards the gate of St. Antholin's.

Yes, it did seem that Mark Duncaster, whether in spite of himself or willingly, was being drawn back into the net woven by Kitty Pereira.

"The chap she married was an American," John said suddenly. "Quite easy for her to get a divorce, she told me. She has grounds, apparently. And she's plenty of money of her own."

"Her grandfather, Mr. Medwin wouldn't like that," Hilary said, more for something to say than because she was concerned with Kitty's situation.

"Oh, old Jock Medwin! He's like Uncle Roger, a couple of old-fashioned stick-in-the-muds."

"Uncle Roger has been very useful to you," she pointed out.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"So what? Times I've resented it, I can tell you."

Hilary sighed.

"Sometimes I don't know what is the matter with you," she said as she got out of the car. "I don't get the hang of you at all. You contradict yourself; I don't know what you really do want. You talked about Elspeth and a position in the firm. . . . Oh, well, I suppose you must live your own life."

His face changed suddenly to that charming gaiety.

"You can bet your sweet life that's what I'll do, Sis. So long. Finished your Christmas shopping?"

She nodded.

"And thanks for the money for Belinda. I shall put it in the account in her name, and I'll buy her a present later on when she's better.

He was staring at her in a curious manner.

"Good-bye, Hil," he said. "Pop over and see Uncle some time. In his own queer way he admires you, you know."

"Well, that's a surprise," she said flippantly. "See you soon."

He did not echo her words. He sat in the car watching her while she went in through the big gates, past the porter's lodge, and towards the wide steps.

She turned and waved, surprised that he had lingered as if to watch her. Usually John was in a hurry to get away. He had given her money for Belinda; at least he had acknowledged a portion of his responsibility. He had given her lunch, but he had also contributed a dash of poison to her thoughts.

Mark Duncaster was obviously renewing his affair with Kitty Pereira, and perhaps that had something to do with the change in his attitude to her.

XIII

THAT EVENING Hilary stood beside the cot where Belinda lay. The child had stirred, had been restless in the process of coming out from the influence of the drug. Hilary was glad that she was here when Belinda recovered consciousness.

Hilary waited, and then with a deep sigh the child opened her eyes, stared dreamily at her surroundings. At sight of the familiar face above her she turned her cheek in a nestling motion towards Hilary's outstretched hand. She looked down at herself at the dressings in a puzzled, tired way; she smiled at the figure of Teddy, still in her own bandages. She made a little murmuring sound with her lips, then closed her eyes and was fast asleep, naturally this time.

Nurse Jones entered the improving conditions on the chart.

"I'm sure you must be pleased with her, Dr. Duncaster," she said brightly, forgetting in this special case and at this time of the year the etiquette which set apart a consultant from the nursing staff.

Hilary started. She had been so occupied with Belinda that she had had her back to the entrance to the cubicle and had not seen that he had been standing there for the last few moments.

He came forward to look at the child. He gave Hilary only

a brief glance which betrayed nothing of the bitterness in his mind.

He spoke to Nurse Jones in a low voice, gave Hilary a slight bend of the head in acknowledgment of her presence there, then he had gone. He could not have trusted himself to stay here. He wanted to put the fresh realization away from him; he felt that he would do anything for forgetfulness. He did not want to see Hilary; he could not bear to exchange a word with her. The very sight of her beside Belinda's cot and the intimacy of the child turning to her so naturally were like daggers thrust into him.

He had been a fool once; he had been a fool again. If she had told him it would have been bad enough, but at least the air would have been clear between them. To make such a fool of him was intolerable. No wonder she had wanted to keep the secret of their friendship from the grapevine of hospital gossip, no wonder she had made excuses about meeting him, had put those friends from Rhodesia first.

Hilary listened to the retreating footsteps, footsteps which she could recognize through the sounds of other footsteps, the movement of the lift, the soft roll of trolley wheels.

"Doesn't Dr. Duncaster look nice in evening dress?" prattled Nurse Jones, still in the elevated mood consequent on the good news about this special patient of hers. "I think a man looks so distinguished in evening dress, don't you? I expect he's going to the big dinner with Sir Hubert. Good of him to look in, but he's always like that."

She stopped suddenly as if at last aware that Hilary was not listening to her. Hilary walked away without answering, and Nurse Jones stared after her.

Hilary did not sleep much that night. Even when she took sleeping tablets, which was not her usual habit, it made no difference to her wakefulness.

All she had to do was to go to Mark and tell him the truth, and it was as simple as that. But with her own observation of Kitty, with John's careless words about Kitty's meeting with Mark, with the change in Mark himself dating from the return of Kitty, should Hilary not put herself in the act of pleading for his old affection?

Pride rebelled against that.

The two things went together, she insisted, the return of Kitty, and his accusation of Hilary. As she turned in bed restlessly, she thought, he was ready to believe, never to ask. He never thought of John, and now I feel so angry that I think I never will tell him. Because if I told him, he would think that I was making a claim on him, reminding him, and that I will never do.

"I don't want to see him. I don't want to think about him."

At least John was a happier subject of thought, John with money in his pocket, thinking of Belinda, even if he refused to see her. John at least was more settled in his mind, perhaps with new hopes of Elspeth.

Once she got out of bed to soothe her restlessness, to read her mother's last letter, with its crisp phrases, to look at the small package which had arrived from home, with the stern message, in Robin's largest printing, "Not to be opened before Christmas."

She looked out of her window at the shaded lights in the block opposite. So many people here in this great building, possibly many others lying awake, in pain or anguish, with greater problems than her own.

She brushed her hair to soothe the tension of the nerves in her head, went back to bed at last to dream of Mark on the other side of rushing waters crisped with foam like the waters of the Zambezi, holding out his arms to her. But he could not cross to her, and while she looked frantically for a boat or a bridge to even steppingstones, she saw a laughing figure beside him, dancing in cerise chiffon.

How ridiculous can a dream be, she told herself in the morning, and the impressions faded before breakfast.

There was a telephone message for her from Elspeth.

"Do you remember you'd said you'd come round and have tea or a drink or something at our hotel before Christmas? You know where I'm staying with Kitty. Well, why not today? I know it's not much use making engagements with you far ahead. Do say you'll come."

"Yes, I will," said Hilary gladly.

She telephoned to Mrs. Bott the latest news about Belinda.

"She must be kept very quiet still," she told her. "But

she's taking a little nourishment—some of it spilt on Teddy, I'm sorry to say—and you'll soon be able to see her."

"That's a great relief," said Mrs. Bott's thankful voice. "Thank you for the trouble you've taken. I must say I miss her, but perhaps she's better away from here. My sister is having some of her husband's people for Christmas, all old people, and it wouldn't be much fun for Belinda."

"She won't be out of hospital until after Christmas," Hilary said decidedly.

What was to be Belinda's fate afterwards? Clearly Mrs. Bott was not going to be able to continue as guardian, as foster-mother. Her erratic health, her dependence on her sister, if not for money, at least for her home and companionship, made her unsuitable in the future.

I shall have to think of something else, thought Hilary. If I could have her myself! But there's St. Antholin's and my job. That wouldn't be possible.

A party with Elspeth as hostess promised some relief from her troubled thoughts. But when she arrived at the fashionable crowded hotel and asked for Miss Medwin, and was taken up in the lift to the suite, it was to find that Elspeth and the other guests had not yet arrived, and that Kitty was the only person in the small, overheated room.

With Elspeth, Hilary had never felt the pressure of wealth and fashion. The girl's natural friendliness treated those things as unimportant trimmings of life.

But with Kitty there seemed an ostentatious flashing of her rings, of running her fingers up and down the crowded bracelets on her arms, an effort to make conversation which would have been daunting to Hilary even without the knowledge that Kitty had once been engaged to Mark Duncaster.

Kitty wore a simple close fitting dress of some gold-colored material which had a glittering thread woven into it. When she moved there was a dazzling effect which obviously pleased her as she moved round the room, lighting a cigarette, touching the artificial carnations which looked so real.

Carnations! Hilary wished they had not been carnations, for they reminded her of the Sunday at Elspeth's home, when Mark had held her in his arms in the greenhouse when the prize carnations were in fulness of bloom and perfume.

"Do sit down," drawled Kitty. "Elspeth won't be long. I don't quite know what she's up to, but she has a list of dependants and pensioners as long as your arm, all to have something personal. Takes too much trouble, I think. Perhaps she'd be better devoting a little time and attention to John. You have a very attractive brother, Hilary."

She smiled sweetly as she curled herself up on the settee.

"Lots of people think that," Hilary said as lightly as she could.

"Yes, he is rather a pet," Kitty said. "Why on earth doesn't Elspeth make up her mind about him? We may be sisters, but we're not a bit alike. It doesn't take me a moment—"

"What doesn't take you a moment?" cried Elspeth from the doorway. "Don't tell Hilary that you only take a moment to dress, for she won't believe you. Hullo, Hilary, I'm glad you've come. The other girls phoned they would be late."

She came towards Hilary and kissed her lightly on the cheek. It was an unusual caress. Her lips were cold, and Hilary had the odd impression that the girl was disturbed.

"Have you been hurrying?" she asked, as Elspeth turned to put down the gaily-wrapped bunkles she had been carrying.

"I really don't know why I came back to England at this trying time," pouted Kitty. "Crowds, and you can't park a car without trouble, and people so in earnest about their work that they can't even go on after a dinner to dance or something."

"You can't expect a busy man to be a playboy," flashed Elspeth. "Did you ring for tea, Kitty?"

"Left it for you," smiled her sister. "I never expected to be back so early last night after that medical dinner. I wouldn't have accepted Sir Hubert's daughter's invitation if I hadn't known that Mark would be there."

She smiled with extra sweetness at Hilary.

"I do think that all work and no play is bad for anyone, don't you?" she asked.

"It depends on the person," Hilary answered tamely.

She wished the other visitors would arrive. She felt she could not stand Kitty much longer. And Elspeth, usually

the easiest and nost natural of hostesses, seemed preoccupied.

Hilary, after her sleepless night, felt tongue-tied and bored, and Kitty was impatient. She fell back on what was obviously her old amusement of teasing her sister.

"Christmas is the time for engagements," she said. "Hilary and I were just talking about you. Why on earth don't you make up your mind about John?"

Elspeth was pouring tea, and did not look up from her task. In spite of her delicate make-up, she looked pale and strained.

"Why don't you?" persisted Kitty, from her nest of cushions on the great settee.

Elspeth gave a little laugh which startled Hilary.

"Perhaps I have made it up," she answered in a voice which suddenly sounded brittle like her sister's. "I know one thing. If I found John out in some . . . in some deceit, I'd have nothing to do with him again."

Kitty laughed her tinkling laugh.

"Oh, my dear, you're too set in your ways. Men aren't saints. You mustn't expect too much. You know, you've always been too set in your ways, Elspeth."

"Well, are you any happier with your ways?" asked Elspeth with an unusual flash of fire. No one can say you're too set, when you change men like . . . like, oh, I don't know. And you come back to England, and make mischief for everyone just to amuse yourself."

She stopped as if aghast at her own vehemence.

"Why, what's wrong with me?" asked Kitty, flouncing from the settee with a great display of slender legs. "You have a chip on your shoulder, Elspeth, just now, so I'll go and change. I've a date this evening."

"You may find yourself landed with the wrong one in the end," Elspeth went on as if goaded by some secret resentment. "You can get away with anything, even a divorce from your Tex."

Kitty shrugged her shoulders.

"Goodness, you are jumping off the deep end. Don't worry yourself, Elspeth, I may be going away soon."

She made a graceful exit.

"I'm sorry, Hilary, I didn't mean to land you in for a family

row," said Elspeth after a strained pause. "I . . . I didn't mean to let myself go like that. Only everything boiled up in me. She talks as if Mark is the only one for her, and it isn't fair. You know, you mustn't let Kitty come between you and Mark."

Hilary's pride would have liked to have said that it was of no importance, but she could not say that to Elspeth.

"She's my own sister, and I'm fond of her when I remember when we were children together. She is older than I am, and perhaps she takes after my mother. She . . . she always likes to have her own way, and she makes more of the men who run after her than is really the case. As long as you make up your mind not to be hurt by the way she talks, it's all right. You won't take too much notice, will you?"

It was ironic that her insistence that Hilary should disregard the renewed friendship with Mark, hurt the girl most.

It was true then; he was spending that little free time he had with Kitty. No wonder he was strained and difficult, seizing such a good excuse as the likeness of Belinda.

Hilary was glad that the other visitors surged in with cries of gladness longing for tea and drinks, chatting of trivialities. She talked more than usual, and Elspeth looked at her curiously. There were two Hilarys—the one sitting there, outwardly gay and talking nonsense, the other hurt and angry and bewildered, trying to adjust herself to a life without the Mark she had known.

Hilary returned to St. Antholin's with despondency in her heart. All very well to see the decorations, the lights in the streets, but they emphasized the sadness of her mood.

The lights mocked her, for she found herself remembering phrases spoken in Mark's deep voice, how the London lights had thrilled him as a schoolboy when they went up again after the darkness of war. He had driven her about in London; so many places were associated with him, and now the blackness of doubt had come between them.

At St. Antholin's, the nurses were in little laughing groups contriving paper chains. Carols were being practised in the Common Room, and the infectious gaiety pointed the contrast between what might have been and what was the reality.

"The starch comes out of the Sisters' caps at Christmas, even the cap of Sister Cunningham," the Nigerian student said to Hilary with his beaming smile.

She nodded politely.

The one bright spot in her life was the gradual improvement in Belinda. With the resilience of childhood she was better every day. She could be moved into the general ward again, where she smiled seraphically at the other children, and showed them where Teddy had been cut and bandaged in strict imitation of her own ordeal.

Hilary had just finished her round the next afternoon and was writing up her notes when the telephone on her small desk rang. As she heard the familiar voice her heart leapt.

"There's one thing I wanted to tell you, Hilary," Mark said with formality. "That case I had in the autumn, in Switzerland. It's because of that they want me again. I'm to fly to Geneva as soon as I can. I've had to rearrange all my appointments. I . . . I—"

He hesitated.

Wouldn't he say something a little less formal, Hilary prayed. Always before she had teased him about not being formal enough when he telephoned her at St. Antholin's. Now she longed for the opposite.

"I'm sorry you're going . . . just now." She managed to say the conventional words.

"Hilary, when I come back, we must have a talk, straighten lots of things out. I'd like things to be straightforward between us before—"

He stopped.

"Must go now. Hope all goes well with you and . . . and the child."

He had rung off before she could answer that.

Straightforward between them! He wanted that, and she could answer it with the truth about John. Hope rose in her again.

The next morning in the ward she found, among the parents of children who were bringing greenery and decorations for the Christmas tree the elegant figure of Elspeth.

The atmosphere of happy excitement, the mounting tension

was as good as any medicine she could prescribe for most of the children, thought Hilary.

"I didn't expect to see you again before Christmas," she said to Elspeth.

"I don't want to stay down in the country just now," the girl answered. "I just ran down to see Gran, and call on the aunts in the village. Then I had this holly cut, and John drove me round here. Now he's taken Kitty on for her to do some last-minute shopping. Gran will be sad in one way, that she's flying off to Switzerland for Christmas, but I suppose she's made up her mind."

"To Switzerland!" repeated Hilary dully. "When did she decide that?"

"Oh, only at the last minute. Maybe last night, or this morning, I don't know when it was, but she's in a state of high excitement."

Hilary could imagine it. The situation had been planned between Mark and Kitty, no doubt. He had to be there because of that important operation, she would be there because of him. And when he came back, he would straighten things out with Hilary.

Straighten things out! Pride and anger came back to strengthen Hilary in her resolve. She went back to her desk to write in her firm, small handwriting:

Dear Mark,

When I said those things to you the other day about changing your mind, I meant them. I understand how you feel. I only wish you the best.

Sincerely,
Hilary.

She put the note in the pigeonhole in the hall. Mark would get it before he flew to Switzerland to join Kitty.

XIV

ON THE DAY before Christmas Eve, Hilary took advantage of Dr. Wedgwood's offer to take her duty to visit her uncle Roger. She had a parcel of his favorite cigars, and had waited to hear from John, but to her surprise there had been no message. She would deliver the gaily-wrapped parcel instead of sending it by post, and she timed her arrival for the late afternoon. If he were not there, at least she had made the effort.

To her surprise, when Manrico opened the door, he said, "Mr. Fennell has been home all day. Please come in, Signorina."

She went into the lounge to find Roger Fennell sitting in his winged chair alone. She realized that she had rarely seen him without a group of people around him, or busy on some project, telephoning, greeting or advising his acquaintances.

"How are you?" she asked. "I hope you haven't been ill. John didn't say anything about it."

"John!" he said. "No, I don't suppose he would. Sit down, my dear, sit down."

There was something restrained about him, she thought. In some subtle way he looked older.

"I don't seem to have seen you lately; nice of you to come round," he told her, but still in this absent-minded manner. "Manrico!"

But already the man had brought the tray with the best sherry as if he knew that Hilary was an honored guest.

"I suppose I should have come over to see you more often," admitted Hilary. "But I've been so busy, and just now there's a lot going on at St. Antholin's, you know."

He looked down at his glass as if the wine did not hold the same savor for him as usual.

"I had hoped you would look on this as your home," he said almost wistfully. "There aren't many of my own people left, not the Fennells."

"So you have to fall back on the Wests," Hilary answered gaily.

She was surprised that this formal great uncle of hers should unbend just now.

"But you're always so busy yourself, with your club, and your business and your own friends." she continued.

"Business friends, maybe, not so much friends of my own. With John . . . I had hoped—"

"Are you sure that you're feeling well, Uncle?"

She did not want to say that he looked older than she had ever seen him look before. He was as neat, as dapper as ever, but the heart seemed to have gone out of him. In the big chair his figure sagged as if weary.

"I'm a bit tired, no wonder. I'm better when I keep going, then I don't notice it. But this morning I couldn't stand it any longer. This news about John has disturbed me very much, Hilary."

"What news?" she asked. "Has he had an accident? Oh, no, not just at Christmas!"

"He knew what I intended, He knew why I put these shares of the company in his name. It was when I thought he was going to settle down, marry Elspeth and—"

"But that's what he wanted, that's what he was waiting for," exclaimed Hilary. "He did think that he might have had some interest given to him."

Her uncle snorted.

"You don't understand. I handed over shares in his name, looking ahead to the time when he might learn to take my place. And what's he done? Sold them all without a word to me. No wonder he dodged me in the office yesterday morning, and then went out without a word to anyone. And he's gone."

So that was where John had got the money from, thought Hilary, the money he had displayed when he gave her the present for Belinda.

"Gone! But where?" the girl asked.

"Don't ask me. I only found it out through the accountants' check. And he'd gone before I could ask him."

"But . . . they were his own shares, to do what he liked," began Hilary.

"Of course, but they were capital; they were a responsibility, a trust. That's how I saw them, that's how I thought he looked at them. Not money to be chucked about for fun. And he's thrown them on the market without telling me, taken the cash and gone."

They were both silent, Hilary shocked and puzzled. Could Elspeth know anything about this?

"You can go and look in his room; he's taken some of his clothes," said Roger Fennell, trying to regain his old composure.

"But are you sure there hasn't been an accident, or . . . or something?" asked Hilary foolishly.

"If a man sells his shares in my company as soon as he lays hands on them, takes away his clothes, and leaves the home which was given to him without a word, can you call that an accident?" he answered with a sarcasm which did not hide his hurt.

She wanted to say how sorry she was, she wanted to protest that there must be some hidden reason for John's actions.

"I'm still perplexed," she said to Roger Fennell.

"I'm not," he said harshly. "It was what I sensed in him all the time—no sense of responsibility. But he fooled me just the same."

Hilary stood before him, her eyes pleading.

"I'm so dreadfully sorry about it," she said. "I feel so much in the dark about it. What about Elspeth?"

"I telephoned her at Medwin's place, and they said she wasn't there. Then I tried the hotel in town where they said she was staying, and they said she was out. Then I felt I didn't want to talk about it at all, and left the matter alone."

"But she must be wondering what has happened to John," said Hilary. "Shall I try and get in touch with her? John may have left her a note or a message or she may know something. You don't think she has gone with him? Oh, no, I don't think Elspeth would do that."

"How do I know what any of you young people would do?" he said. "Hilary, could you spend a little of your time here . . . with me? I don't feel like seeing other people, answer-

ing questions, turning off inquiries. If I go out, that's what will happen to me. But you, you do understand."

"I could easily come over here, of course," said Hilary. "I'm off duty on Christmas night, but go back on Boxing Day, for night duty, I mean."

"Then stay here; stay the night in your own room," he urged her, with a reminder of his old autocratic manner. "I'll arrange it like that. And I tell you what I'll do. I'll book a personal call for you to your mother at the time you want on Christmas Day. You'd like that?"

"That would be my best Christmas present," she told him gladly.

Except a telephone call from Switzerland, from Mark Duncaster, which could never come now.

He would be with Kitty.

Hilary telephoned Elspeth's hotel again, but this time the answer was that Miss Medwin had come in, but had said that she did not wish to be disturbed. Callers could leave their names and telephone numbers.

"I wonder if she knows something about John," Hilary said wonderingly.

"Leave it, leave it," he said querulously. "All that matters is that John's gone, and I don't care where."

Hilary felt sorry for him, for the loss of his pride, for his disappointment, for the hurt to his possessive affection.

"I'm afraid I really must go now," she said.

"But you'll come on Christmas Day? Come here for dinner. Spend the night here, treat this as your home. I was a lonely old feller before John came, and now . . . but I suppose there'll be all sorts of goings-on at St. Antholin's. Can't expect a lively young woman like you to leave that for me."

"You are artful, aren't you?" asked Hilary. "A lively young woman might get a little bit tired once in a while."

He smiled for the first time since she had arrived that afternoon.

"And after all, Hilary, you are part of my family," he said. "Expect you to Christmas Day dinner."

It was not the sort of Christmas Day which Hilary had expected to spend. At St. Antholin's there were the carols,

broken into by a sudden casualty list of accidents on frozen roads. She saw the procession of nurses with their lanterns, singing carols as they went through the wards, and recognized the high sweet voice of Nurse Jones from Wales. She had the joy of watching Belinda opening parcels, almost breathless with excitement. In the afternoon there was a conjuror who reduced even the exuberant small boys to momentary silence by producing white rabbits from various parts of their anatomy.

"Pity Dr. Duncaster isn't here," said Nurse Jones, sentimentally, as she renewed her lipstick.

Hilary wished she had not overheard the words, for the sense of loss came back.

"He's on to a good thing, quite a compliment asking him in a special case," observed the Irish girl. "Sure, but he'll miss his own Christmas at home."

Would he, Hilary wondered. Was he with Kitty, caught up in a revival of his old passion?

She dared not think about him.

She was glad that it was time for her to drive through the deserted snowy streets to her uncle's flat. She drove fast, glad to leave the one place which reminded her so much of Mark for one which had no association with him.

At least she mattered to her great uncle, who seemed unashamed now to admit that he could be old and tired and hurt. Manrico smiled at her when he took her coat and her small case at the door of the flat.

"It is good for him to have someone of his own. In Italy, we always have family, ah, so many."

And when Hilary took out to Maddalena in the modern kitchen the little picture of an Italian lake which had caught her eyes in a junk shop near St. Antholin's, the woman wept happy tears.

The sharing of homesickness seemed to unite the inhabitants of Roger Fennell's flat as they had never been united before. By common consent they avoided the mention of the one who should have been there.

Then came the highlight of Hilary's day—the call, the precious expensive telephone call, the fact that over thousands of miles she could hear the miracle of her mother's voice. She

could exchange the words that sounded so little and meant so much. She heard of Robin's success at the Agricultural Show, of the Evans family, of Josiah's new wife, of the flowers in bloom in the garden.

"Isn't John there?"

"He's out just now, I'm afraid."

Hilary could not spoil this day for her mother.

"I wanted to thank him for such an expensive present, and by air mail too."

"What was it?"

"A shawl, a lovely silk shawl, foreign; I don't know where he would get it. He must have taken great trouble to choose it for me. Hilary, you're sure you're all right?"

"Of course, Mother. Don't fuss."

"You voice doesn't sound quite . . . quite as usual. Perhaps it's the phone. Thank your uncle from me—this is the nicest present he could give anyone."

"Tell your mother that I may be paying her a visit one of these days," muttered her uncle beside her. "Must keep in with the family."

"Oh, you'd love it," Hilary said enthusiastically.

The happy moments were over. She went to Roger Fennell and kissed him on the cheek.

After the Christmas dinner there was television to watch in the evening, and her uncle slept peacefully in his chair, and suddenly Hilary was weary too, with the cumulative weariness of the emotions, the strain of the last two weeks.

That night she had the delicious luxury of her own; her uncle's present of a housecoat of brocade sprinkled with flowers to match the first spring flowers on her dressingtable, warmth without effort to contrast with the snowy world outside, music at the turn of a switch. And beside her, the little round frame which Mrs. Bott had sent her, containing a tiny snapshot of Belinda in her bathingsuit, running with arms outstretched, her eyes full of happy laughter.

The next morning she slept so late that she stared aghast at the clock and the smiling Maddalena, as she brought in a tray of morning tea.

"How terrible!"

"No, the Signor says you must not be waked. But he

waits for you, if you like, to come to have late breakfast now, and do not wait to dress."

"I'd like that."

Hilary sprang out of bed after the maid had gone. The world outside looked white and sugar-coated, a new experience for her. A line of frost marked the nearby buildings, the trees in the park were graceful shapes in silver.

When she went into the dining room she said gaily, "I know. It's just that you wanted to see the new housecoat in action. I could go to the theatre in it. Isn't it superb? I've never had anything so luxurious in my life."

She swung round before him, took a mannequin's walk, swirled the wide brocade skirts and turned again.

"Very nice," he said. "It's very pleasant to have you here like this, Hilary. I wish you could stay."

"I promised Dr. Wedgwood that I'd take over so that she could be with her daughter," she reminded him, as she poured his coffee. "Call this breakfast! It might be lunch, by the time and the quantity! Well, Cinderella will change quite soon, and then say good-bye, and thank you for a . . . a peaceful time."

At least here she was away from reminders of Mark, if not from the thought of him.

They sat over their pleasant meal, and he talked of other Christmases he had spent.

"Can't you get out of that promise to Dr. Wedgwood?" he asked her. "Surely a lonely old great uncle—"

Hilary shook her head at him.

"You're a fraud, aren't you? Artfully trying to get your own way."

"John always said that you were too soft-hearted," he grumbled. "And I believe he was right."

A wild idea came to Hilary. She could show the little picture of Belinda to him now. John had run away, had wilfully cut himself off from her and from the man who had kept him for the last three years. John was no longer Roger Fennell's responsibility. But perhaps Belinda might become that.

The doorbell played its musical chime, and they looked at each other inquiringly.

"Who can it be?" asked Hilary. "You told everyone you wanted a quiet day, and besides, so many of your friends are abroad for Christmas."

She saw the expectancy in his face. Could it be John after all?

Manrico returned to announce "Miss Medwin."

There were other footsteps on the polished floor of the wide hall. Surely a man's footsteps.

Roger Fennell half rose from his chair.

It was not John. It was Mark Duncaster who followed Elspeth into the room.

XV

MARK'S GLANCE sought Hilary first, with eagerness, with anxiety. She felt the flush rising to her cheeks. She had tried so hard to put him out of her thoughts, and now he was here, to awaken all her doubts and desires.

And why wasn't Kitty with him, she wondered.

She knew that her back stiffened, she thrust her hands deep into the pockets of the brocade housecoat so that they should not tremble with the excitement of his arrival.

She saw that he looked weary and travel-stained and at once she was anxious about him as if nothing had happened to part them.

Now she turned to Elspeth, who wore a gay taffeta dress under her fur coat, as if she were going to a party. She, too, looked as if her composure were shaken.

"I hope you'll forgive me for breaking in on you like this," she began. "But there's something I had to see you about, Mr. Fennell. I was just starting out for a party in town—yes, I've been home with Gran for a couple of days—when Mark phoned me. His plane had been delayed coming from Geneva, but he phoned me from the airport, and we arranged to pick each other up here."

"What has happened? John? You've heard from John?" asked Hilary.

The Italian manservant had taken the hint from Roger Fennell's raised eyebrows, and brought the tray of drinks with a glance of interest at the two visitors.

"No, no, I don't want anything," said Elspeth.

"If I may have some coffee?" asked Mark. "I've had rather a crazy journey."

Hilary poured out the coffee for him with a hand that trembled.

He was trying to get her to look at him, but she would not meet his eyes.

"Sit down, Elspeth," said Roger Fennell testily. "You know about John then."

She sat down suddenly on the edge of the wide yellow velvet bench against the diningroom wall and said, "I'd like to talk to you alone, please. May I?"

"Would you like me to go into the lounge?" Hilary asked quickly, puzzled, and this time she had to meet Mark's eyes. "Or I can go and change."

Elspeth nodded. Mark followed Hilary to the door. It was so strange to feel him near her again that she hesitated.

"If you'll wait in there, I think I'll go and change," she murmured.

But he caught at her hand and said, "What did you mean by that idiotic note? It was sent on to me, of all things, by air, just when I was longing to see you and ask you why the hell you couldn't tell me—"

She must keep calm, she must try to understand, she must not reproach.

"If you'll wait in there," she began, but he caught her hand.

"No, you don't escape me now. Come in here."

He had pushed open the door of the smaller room, which was book-room, music-room, den, and which was today adorned with the overflow of flowers which Jock Medwin had sent. It was warm with the central heating, and scented with the special carnations in a tall gilt basket.

Mark pushed the door behind them. He came to her and put his arms round her shoulders, swinging her round so that she faced him.

"Darling," he said. "If you knew how I've wanted you.

Whatever has happened, we must be together. I love you so much."

She saw the tired lines in his face; he had been away from her, he had come back to her. Nothing else mattered as he kissed her, as she put her arms round his neck. The memory of those bitter words, her jealousy of Kitty Pereira, had faded as if those things were of no account between them.

"What happened in Switzerland?" she asked at last as she drew back from his kisses.

"There were two cases there. The place was snowed up; I had the devil of a time, lost one. Couldn't be helped, I suppose, but I felt wretched. I thought you'd written that idiotic note because of Belinda, because there were things you wouldn't tell me."

She gave an exclamation.

"Then I planned to get back for Christmas Day so that at least I could talk to you, see you, get things straight, as I had said, and everything went wrong. Delays on the plane, turned back because of the weather, and I didn't know where you'd be. That's why I got on to Elspeth. One day we can talk everything over together; you tell me what you choose to let me know, and let the rest go. I want you."

They were the sweetest words she had ever heard. The scent of the carnations was heady as the scent had been in the hothouses of Jock Medwin months ago.

She nestled against his shoulder, and looked up at him. He caught his breath as he met her eyes.

"Hilary," he began.

There was the sound of heels tapping on the parquet flooring.

"Sorry to banish you like that," said Elspeth, and her voice sounded as if there had been tears in it. "What a way to treat you both! But I did want to talk to Mr. Fennell alone. Do come along now."

Mark swung Hilary's hand in his as they followed Elspeth. The Italian servant had taken the opportunity to clear the table in his deft way; now he closed the door behind him.

"But what has happened? You say you've heard from John?" asked Hilary anxiously.

"Yes, I knew just before he went. He's in Switzerland."

"In Switzerland? Did you see him then?"

Hilary turned on Mark, a question in her eyes.

"Did you see Kitty then?"

"Good Lord, no. I was in Geneva. John was up at St. Moritz. I saw his name in the paper, one of the English arrivals."

He looked across at Elspeth.

"But why?" cried Hilary. "Why was John there?"

Elspeth had seated herself again on the yellow velvet seat. This time she leaned back and lit a rare cigarette.

"Can't you guess? He didn't go alone. He went with Kitty."

John and Kitty. Hilary remembered words and glances, Kitty's gaiety, John's talk with her as he drove her back to the hospital after that lunch.

"John and Kitty," she repeated slowly, and looked from Elspeth to her uncle.

His hands trembled on the arms of his favorite wing chair.

"The young scoundrel," he said. "So that's where the money from the shares is going, the money that was to be the foundation of his future."

"Perhaps it is," said Mark drily.

"And with another man's wife," continued Roger Fennell. "That my nephew should behave like this."

"She may not be another man's wife for so long," said Elspeth, and Hilary admired the way that she kept her voice steady. "If Tex divorces her, then the road is clear again for her. Kitty always knew what she wanted."

Hilary had gone to sit on a low velvet-covered stool near her uncle. Mark was standing behind her, and she turned round to look at him.

"But you, I thought . . . I thought she was trying for you again, and that you wished you hadn't met me. That's why I wrote to you, that's why I thought you made an excuse—you wanted the past with her back again, without me."

She didn't care that the others might hear her words, she had to come straight out with it. She didn't care that she was humbling herself before the elderly man whom she had half disliked at first, that she should give one secret away before Elspeth.

Mark's astonishment showed in his face. He pulled a chair forward and sat down near her.

"How silly can you get!" he exclaimed. "Of course she made a set at me, any fool could see that. Just what she would do. Did I take it seriously for one moment? What is the matter with you that you should get such a crazy idea into your head?"

"I think I'll have a glass of brandy, Hilary," said Uncle Roger with a touch of fretfulness. "I can't get over all this. I can't help thinking, Elspeth, that if you'd married John before, none of this trouble would have happened. You'd have kept him on a straight line."

Elspeth smiled sadly across at Hilary.

"Would that have been what he wanted? Would that have been any good for either of us? I didn't want to be a schoolmarm to him, but I did care . . . very much, until I realized something else."

Mr. Fennell took the glass from Hilary.

"Something else—what else can there be? Something else about John? What else *could* there be?"

Hilary was intent on Elspeth's words.

"It began to dawn on me after I'd been to the hospital . . . twice, after I'd seen the little girl Belinda."

Hilary said sharply, "It must have been that day when you came back to the hotel. You'd seen her. You knew. I thought you behaved strangely that day."

"It was rather a shock," admitted Elspeth. "That was when I tackled John."

Roger Fennell's eyebrows knitted together in the familiar frown. Mark leaned forward, towards Hilary.

"But he told me . . . I thought . . . what a fool I was!"

Elspeth turned her head towards him.

"For Heaven's sake, Mark, couldn't you see it, the likeness, at once, I mean? That Belinda was John's child?"

There was silence for a moment in the warm luxurious room. There was the faint murmur of music from the end of the hall as the service door was opened.

Hilary's thoughts were with the child whose life had been given back to her by the man she loved.

"And Mark saved her life," she said softly.

Mark's face was strained, she felt the clutch on her hand tightening.

"Good God, so that was it! But I thought . . . John said, and that woman— You're right, Elspeth, I should have known."

Hilary smiled at him, and crossed the room to sit beside Elspeth.

"How did you guess? And John didn't know himself until I told him when I arrived in England. You were not to know."

"If he'd told me himself, it might have been different," said Elspeth painfully. "Who was Belinda's mother? Where is she?"

"She was my friend, a good friend who stayed with us at home years ago. Then I didn't hear from her, and John went away, and I didn't know where she was until I met her—"

"She was the girl at the hotel, then; her name was Fanshawe," Mark broke in. "But that woman who had brought up Belinda, she said, she pointed out—"

"Not Mrs. Bott, I'm sure," said Hilary. "You might have seen her sister; she never seemed to like me. I don't know why."

"But why didn't you tell me about Belinda? Surely—"

Elspeth spoke to him sharply.

"Because of John, of course, wasn't it, Hilary? I suppose you promised, and he wouldn't want me to know. And if Mark had known, he might have told me."

Mark was silent.

"How did you find out?" asked Hilary.

"I . . . I don't quite know," said Elspeth slowly. "After all, I knew John very well. And I wasn't fool enough to imagine that I was the first. And there were little things, John saying something about the date he came to England. And I knew it was a lie. I saw him look at Hilary once or twice as if, oh, as if . . . I can't explain it. Then he was so definite about not wanting me to go to the hospital to see the little girl, when you'd talked about her operation, Hilary. And then Kitty came."

She turned her head away from them so that she stared out at the pale silvery mist beyond the silken curtains.

"Let's shut out the day, even if it is a white one," said Hilary impulsively, and she went to pull the cords so that the silk curtains slid together in rich folds.

She had given time to Elspeth to recover herself. This girl was suffering a hurt which Hilary could understand, which no words could help, which only time and her own courage could heal.

Hilary switched on the wall lights.

"Belinda, Belinda," said Roger Fennell testily. "Perhaps someone will tell me all this in a simple way. John's child."

"I'll show you," said Hilary impulsively.

She ran to her own room for the photograph. In the long mirror on one wall she saw herself in the gay brocade coat, her face radiant.

She went back to tell Roger Fennell of Violet Fanshawe's tragic death.

"But she'd made what provision she could for the child," he said thoughtfully, as if that fact impressed him.

He held the photograph of Belinda in his hand while Hilary told him of Violet's confession, her own mission to Mrs. Bott, of the child's heart and the operation.

"Well, I'm blessed," he said. "What I'm astonished at, Duncaster, is the duplicity of these women. Here's Hilary, arriving from a strange country—"

"Almost a foreigner, eh?" Hilary teased him as she could never had done when she first met him.

"No, my dear, never a stranger. After all, you were related to the Fennells," her uncle said with dignity. "And you carried all this worry about young John, and took the responsibility of this child, and no one knew anything about it. There must be a lot more in you than meets the eye."

"I agree with you, sir," said Mark, and Hilary laughed at them both.

"Don't forget that I have to go back to St. Antholin's soon," she told them.

A fresh edition of coffee arrived, and even with the painful undercurrents of the news about John, Hilary had a certain comfort in knowing that Mark was there, that the barriers between them had been swept away, that now they could talk freely without her suffering any sense of disloyalty.

Roger Fennell still held the photograph in its simple round frame in his hand."

"Belinda, eh?" he was saying thoughtfully. "Then, of course, she must have a touch of the Fennells in her. I must see the child one day, Hilary."

"Of course," she cried. "She can have visitors."

"If she can stand Christmas in the children's ward, then she can stand anything," Mark said. "She's a plucky little thing."

"The nurses made quite a fuss of her," said Hilary brightly, and now Mark could bear to hear the affection in her voice. "And now I really must get ready and go, Uncle."

"I'll come with you," said Mark, as he held the door open for her. "I've been blind and jealous and stupid."

At the last whispered words she smiled at him.

Elspeth followed her, to smoke an aimless cigarette while Hilary changed into her suit and packed her small case to take back to the hospital.

"You're going on to a party?" asked Hilary. "I'm so glad of that; you don't want to have time to think."

"I may be sensible in time," said Elspeth quietly. "I had a day or two shut up by myself in the hotel, and that's no good to anyone. One thing is, Kitty would so enjoy taking a man away from me, I can imagine her laughing over the joke."

Hilary spoke indignantly.

"They're two of a kind; they may find each other out, or they may have no illusions about each other to lose. Let him go, Elspeth, even if he is my brother. It's better so. But it doesn't make it any easier to bear."

"Thank Heaven for make-up," said Elspeth lightly. "And Hilary, I've been thinking. That child, Belinda, I couldn't bear it when I realized at first. But if she comes down to the convalescent home at Manor Lea, I'll have her to stay and . . . and make up to her a bit what she has lost."

"Would you?" Hilary was eager. "That would be good for her. She's been bandied about like a . . . a little sack of potatoes, but everyone has been fond of her. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Uncle Roger falls a victim to her when he sees her too. That would be a solution, for a while."

"Or until you took her on yourself?" asked Elspeth with a touch of her old mischief. "I shouldn't be surprised at that."

Hilary hesitated.

"I don't know about that. It would depend—"

Then she flushed and laughed. "Time will tell."

When they returned to the men, Mark announced, "I'm driving you to the hospital. It's no good arguing. You can collect your own car from the garage some other time."

"But what about Elspeth?"

"I'll take a taxi on to my party," she told them.

"Come again soon, Hilary," said Roger Fennell as he escorted them all to the door.

When Elspeth had departed, Mark opened the door of his car for Hilary.

"How did you happen to have it?" she asked as she tucked herself into the familiar seat.

"Left it at the airport when I went. I hate that business with the bus or a taxi. You know, Hilary, this isn't a bit what it ought to be. I ought to be taking you out on some glorious binge to celebrate our finding of each other, and instead—"

"You're going straight back to your flat to sleep and sleep, and take that tired look out of your eyes," she ordered him.

He chuckled.

"Yes, ma'm. And you?"

"I have my job. And I shall be on call."

"Don't sound so pleased and self-righteous about it. You'll go in to look at Belinda, I know. Give her my love. After all I gave her back her heart. Wait a minute."

He stopped the car near the park railings.

"There's a packet in my case. Can you reach it, on the back seat? You open it."

She opened the case with the key he handed to her, and felt something wrapped in soft paper.

"What is it?"

"Open it and see. It will want more wrapping, I expect, but you can do that."

They were within the range of a high street light, which sent an orange glow over the slightly frosted road.

"A doll, a doll in Swiss costume!" exclaimed Hilary. "But there's only one thing the matter with it."

"What's that?" he asked in alarm. "I thought you could always give a girl a doll."

"No bandages," laughed Hilary. "Belinda loves them sick or broken or with bad legs. I don't know why it is."

"She's like you, that's what it is," he said frankly. "You love John and took on what was his job. You do all you can for Belinda, and love her because she needs you. And tonight you order me to get that tired look out of my eyes, as if—"

"As if—" repeated Hilary softly. "There's tomorrow, you know."

"Tomorrow with you? And very soon after that, darling."

After a happy pause, Hilary said, "You really must drive on."

He obeyed her with a laugh.

"How different it all looks in the snow," Hilary said with satisfaction. "White roofs, and the trees have new silver dresses. I didn't know London could look so lovely."

"And not for long," he said grimly, to tease her enthusiasm.

They had arrived at the gateway of St. Antholin's.

"And even here," said Hilary with rapture. "Why, the old gate looks as if it were covered with icing sugar, like the ornament on—"

"On a wedding cake?" laughed Mark, as he kissed her. "Good-bye, my dear, until tomorrow. Kiss Belinda for me. And I'll remember your hint about the wedding cake."

She turned to wave to him from the steps, saw the answering wave as his car turned. Then she went happily into St. Antholin's.

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